

Our Instruments are Our Masks: Developing Communication Skills and Confidence Through Collective Free Improvisation

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Résumé de l'article

This study explores the idea that musical instruments can function as masks in the context of collective free improvisation. Just as masks are used in theatre improvisation to build confidence and facilitate creative expression, musicians can use their instruments in similar ways, increasing their level of comfort and allowing them to connect and communicate with others in ways not available through traditional social exchanges. Through a variety of interviews, questionnaires, and performances, 30 instrumentalists and vocalists participated in this study and shared their experiences performing with their peers. Through analysis of recorded performances, interview and questionnaire responses, it was discovered that the vast majority of participants identified with the idea that their instruments functioned as masks. Most of these individuals believed their instruments helped them express parts of themselves that could not be expressed through other means, and many believed their instruments allowed for the creation of a persona, in which they felt they could “be” someone else when performing. Participants were in agreement that they only felt their instruments functioned this way in the context of collective free improvisation. The strong feelings of connection, confidence, and communication experienced by participants strengthen the case for incorporating free improvisation into music education.

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Kathryn Ladano

Introduction

As a performer and teacher of freely improvised music, I have always been fascinated by the ways in which musicians seem to have the ability to transform themselves when performing. On many occasions I have witnessed musicians who appear withdrawn, passive, and reluctant to draw attention to themselves transform into confident personalities, becoming musical leaders who other players are drawn to follow, accompany, or emulate. Transformations like these are fascinating to observe because the individuals who achieve them appear unable to do so without their instruments. As a performer myself, I have also experienced this kind of transformation. In fact, performing in this way has broken down barriers for me and has allowed me to form closer connections with others. When I have witnessed and experienced these phenomena, it has always been in the context of free improvisation.

While free improvisation, which is the basis of this study, has historically been quite difficult to define, it is perhaps best explained in simple and open terms. Free improvisation is music that tends to lack specific rules, relying on aural cues and individual expression rather than fitting into a specific harmonic, rhythmic, or formal framework—though it is certainly possible for freely improvised music to contain these elements (Ladano 2). In this type of music, the self-expression of the musicians participating is of greater importance, as is the musician's connection to the other players and their audience. It stands to reason that if there is a musical practice that can allow players to transcend their social limitations, better connect with others, and access self-confidence, it would be free improvisation. While it has not been studied extensively, there is some scientific evidence that demonstrates these benefits. Robert G. Allen, for example, has shown that the practice of free improvisation offers psychological benefits such as aiding musicians with performance anxiety (v).

My study examined the complex relationship between improvising musicians and their instruments and sought to better understand the transformative process referenced above. I hypothesized that, in the context of free improvisation, musical instruments function in the same way masks do in dramatic and cultural performances. I examined the ability of instruments to aid in a deeper expression of the self, provide a sense of security for performers, or allow for a deeper or different type of connection with others. While these were my primary areas of exploration, my study yielded a variety of unexpected results that offer greater insight into the improviser's relationship with her instrument.

Masks, Masking, and Free Improvisation

In order to discover if and how instruments function like masks in collective free improvisation, I consulted a variety of mask theories in disciplines such as drama, psychology, and anthropology. While there are few sources that have broached the subject of masks and improvising musicians, there are many concepts in masking theories that recur across disciplines that are applicable to free improvisation.

In the field of drama, mask improvisation is commonly used as a creative exercise for actors. Mask improvisation is not routinely used in music, but actors use this method to learn how to perform more effectively when unmasked. Theatre and Dance scholar Sears Eldredge has explored this type of improvisation and has stated that it is meant to help individuals better understand the self, the persona, and characterization, which can all be applied to non-masked performance (143). Eldredge has theorized that there are five different functions of masks. These include Mask as Frame (masks are used to highlight what is placed within them, focusing attention inward), Mask as Mirror (masks allow one to see a surface reflection of themselves and see through to another reality), Mask as Mediator (masks mediate between opposing worlds or mediate the flow of power or transition of the self), Mask as Catalyst (the mask stimulates change or transformation), and Mask as Transformer (the mask transforms and unites) (Eldredge 5). Of all these functions, Mask as Transformer is the most recognized and discussed in the literature and is also the most applicable to this study. Like masks, instruments can allow musicians to reveal themselves in new and different ways. In essence, instruments allow musicians to communicate and express themselves in ways that are unachievable through any other mechanism.

Before exploring mask theories further, it is important to address the notion of “the self,” a concept whose meaning is not universally agreed upon. Some theorists speculate that the self is an abstract entity that is really a narrative self and nothing more. Others suggest that the self simply does not exist. My study relates most closely to Albert Newen’s concept of the embodied self. In this theory, “the self is the embodied human being, while the self-model is an integrative pattern of characteristic features which is anchored in the body and which determines the body as the anchoring unit for self-conscious experiences” (Newen 5). Newen’s embodied self is not abstract—it is rooted in and expressed by the human body. In other words, the body and the mind (including one’s sense of self) are one. Newen’s theory relates to different mask theories because the act of wearing a mask distorts the look of the face (part of the body), which in return can change how individuals express themselves.

In addition to the concept of Mask as Transformer, another aspect of mask theory that appears regularly in sources on theatre and anthropology is Masks as Power, where the mask has power over the person wearing it, and that power gives the wearer power over her audience. Here, masks provide their wearers with defense and protection as well as being a means of offense and intimidation (Eldredge 7). The concept of both concealing and revealing is also common in mask scholarship. Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard explores the need for humans to mask in his book, *The Right to Dream*. He notes that masks represent duplicity: they allow people to appear other than they are, yet they also result in people revealing more of themselves (187). Efrat Tseëlon has also written about the duplicitous role of masks, noting that their real role is to present truth in the shape of deception (5). In collective free improvisation, instruments serve a similar role. While they are unable to conceal a person in the traditional sense (the musician will always be clearly visible when performing on any instrument), the instrument, like a mask, acts as a channel to reveal different parts of an individual’s identity.

Mask theories also broach the subject of the social implications of masking. In her article, “Masks and Powers,” Elizabeth Tonkin argues that masks are social phenomena acting as operators in communicative events between people (239). While she echoes assertions about the transformative ability of masks and the idea that they do not really hide an individual but rather reveal them, she also notes the important role of audience. She believes that the observers of masks (the audience) are not passive, but caught up in the performance and able to be changed by it (236). This concept echoes the work of Derek Bailey (1930–2005), who believed audiences can have a significant impact on performances of live improvisation. For

Bailey, “the effect of the audience’s approval or disapproval is immediate and, because its effect is on the creator at the time of making the music, its influence is not only on the performance but also on the forming and choice of the stuff used” (44).

The psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) is perhaps the most renowned figure to write about masking and the concept of the persona. He describes the persona, which is derived from Latin and refers to a theatrical mask, as the hypothetical mask people wear in order to adapt to and deal with the world (*Volume 9* 122). Jung posits that it is essentially an exaggerated version of ourselves that we present to others, hoping to make a more favourable impression. He believed that every profession has its own characteristic persona which, while it isn’t real, acts as a compromise between an individual and a societal understanding of how a person should appear (*Volume 7* 156). For Jung, one’s public persona is a type of mask, but the wearer’s “real individuality is always present and makes itself felt indirectly if not directly” (*Volume 7* 156). While it differs somewhat from the other masking theories discussed, a number of participants in this study strongly identified with Jung’s concept of the persona, noting that their instruments allow them to create one when performing, which happened on several occasions throughout the study. For example, when interviewed, some of my study subjects noted that they found themselves musically expressing themselves as if they were someone else. In some cases, this simply meant that the musicians imagined themselves as someone with more confidence, which allowed them to perform better. In other cases, the musicians were imagining and spontaneously creating a character that they resonated with in the moment of performance. In addition, some imagined they were emulating a specific composer whose style resonated with them while they were performing.

There are many musical artists that have built masks and mask-wearing into their live performances, from Björk to the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Several researchers have analyzed the use of masks by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, many attempting to discover the purpose and the intention behind their mask wearing. Allan M. Gordon, for example, looked at the band’s use of masks and face paint, noting that these transform the bodies of the performers who use masking as support, creating a symbiotic relationship between visual and performance art (57). Once again, the concept of transformation of the performer is highlighted, a key concept in masking.

There are many parallels between free improvisation and masking. Literature on both subjects routinely discusses the importance of self-expression, the role of audience, the forging of social connections, the presentation of a different face to the world and the revelation of different parts of oneself, the experience of transformation. While I have found little literature beyond my own research that draws parallels between these fields of research, there is much common ground suitable for exploration.

Methodology

This study involved thirty participants and employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Information was gathered via interviews and questionnaires as well as performance observation and analysis. The subjects used in this study were all under the age of thirty, had some experience with improvisation but did not self-identify as professional players, and were currently or formerly registered in a university music program. These parameters (such as the age limitation) were put in place to ensure that subjects would be experienced enough to complete the performance exercises without any guidance or direction while avoiding participants with too much confidence or experience performing. By limiting the age, my goal

was to ensure that all participants had roughly the same levels of experience, resulting in them performing in similar ways throughout the study and ideally not “taking over” or “showing off.”

The study took place in three different cities in Canada: Waterloo, Ontario; Toronto, Ontario; and Lethbridge, Alberta. These locations were chosen because each city has a university with students and alumni currently or formerly involved in the study of improvised music. These schools included Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, York University in Toronto, and the University of Lethbridge in Alberta. Lethbridge was chosen as a location specifically because of the university’s Integra Contemporary and Electroacoustics (ICE) ensemble directed by D. Andrew Stewart, which is focused on electronic sounds and instruments. Because my intention was to discover as much as possible about an improvising musician’s relationship with their instrument, I aimed to include as many different types of instruments as possible. Instruments involved in the study included voice, piano, electric and acoustic guitar, keyboard, percussion, violin, trombone, synthesizer, saxophone, trumpet, clarinet, and both double bass and electric bass guitar.

Two limitations of this study are the fact that the subject pool was not gender balanced and that there was not greater diversity amongst the participants. While I had strived to include an equal number of men and women as participants, it proved difficult to find participants in each of the research locations that matched the study parameters. As a result, ten of the participants were cisgender women and twenty were cisgender men. In terms of ethnic diversity, approximately 15% of the research subjects were Indigenous, Black, or People of Colour.

The study design required each participant to improvise according to a variety of parameters, engage in two one-on-one interviews, and complete seven questionnaires. The interviews took place both at the very beginning and at the end of each session. The first interview was intended to determine each participant’s subjective understanding of certain terminologies used in the study. For example, participants were asked what they thought it meant to feel connected or inhibited when improvising, how they recognize when they are communicating with other players, what it means when people describe their instruments as extensions of themselves, etc. The second interview was significantly more detailed, aiming to get at a better understanding of each subject’s relationship with their instrument and to encourage participants to expand upon feelings measured in the subject questionnaires.

Questionnaires were given to each participant immediately after completing each performance exercise in order to document and assess their impressions and feelings, which were later compared against one another. A final questionnaire, significantly longer in length, was given once all performance exercises had been completed. It gathered more information from the subjects but also measured consistency of responses by repeating questions that had been asked earlier in the process.

The primary element of the study was a series of performance exercises. There were six of these in total and they were presented in a specific order with the ones deemed to be the easiest occurring earlier in the study. Each of the performances and interviews were recorded and took place in a controlled environment featuring only me and the other participants.

The performance exercises designed for this study were largely influenced by my own experiences teaching improvisation. I had noticed that when I gave my students different parameters in which to perform not only did their musical output change, but their body language and the way they presented themselves changed as well. For example, I had previously asked students to play in the dark, improvise using only their voices, and improvise

wearing a facial mask. When playing in the dark, my students often appeared less inhibited, more willing to take musical risks, and more comfortable overall. When using only their voices, most students found performing to be very liberating because they enjoyed having everyone in the class perform on the same instrument, having the same tools for musical expression. The creation of these exercises, interview questions, and questionnaires was also influenced in part by masking theories such as the concepts of Mask as Power and Mask as Transformer. Specifically, the concepts of masks allowing for both transformation and access to power were worked into the questions participants were asked. This enabled me to see how the experience of participants changed from exercise to exercise and how different types of masking provided different experiences for the participants.

The six performance exercises were carefully designed in terms of what order they were presented in, with most providing a different type of masking environment. The first performance exercise was simply called “The Warm-Up.” As the name implies, it was meant to give participants an opportunity to get comfortable with being filmed and familiarize themselves with the instruments and sounds created by the other participants in the study. There were both structured and unstructured versions of this exercise, the structured version simply dictating an order in which each participant would start and stop playing. This was the only exercise in the study that did not specifically involve any type of masking.

The second performance exercise, “The Dark Room,” required the participants to perform a group improvisation in a darkened space without the ability to see one another. The intention was to create a mask of darkness to perform in, ideally enabling participants to feel more confident taking risks since no one was able to see them. This exercise was presented second because it helped musicians to open up and feel more comfortable expressing themselves in my previous experience.

The third exercise was called “Instrument Switch.” It involved having participants improvise as a group without using the instruments they brought with them. They were permitted to switch instruments with other participants or to perform using objects in the room. The intention of this exercise was to see how participants would respond when the connection to their primary instrument, their mask, was disrupted, forcing them to improvise with something less familiar. This exercise was introduced third, after participants already had a chance to feel comfortable playing their primary instruments for the first two exercises.

The fourth exercise of the study, “Voice Alone,” required participants to improvise as a group using only their voices. Like “The Warm-Up,” this exercise was performed in two parts with both a structured and unstructured component (with the structured version dictating an order of entrances and exits). The intention was to, again, disrupt the connection between subjects and their primary instruments (for non-vocalists) and to create an environment in which every participant had the same tools to work with. It was expected that this exercise would be more difficult for some participants, which is why it was introduced later in the study. Like the previous exercise, it removed the participant’s primary instrument, or their mask (except for the vocalists, who were still performing on their primary instruments). While it would have been interesting to remove the vocalist’s primary instrument for a second time (as was done in the Instrument Switch exercise), I wanted to examine the group’s musical experience with everyone utilizing the same instrument. “Voice Alone” was the only exercise in which this was possible.

The fifth exercise of the study, “Masks,” required participants to improvise as a group while literally masking themselves. Participants were provided with a variety of facial masks (including masks that covered either the full face or half of it) and other masking materials such as

scarves, hats, and other accessories. As in "The Dark Room," this exercise was intended to introduce another type of masking in which each participant's face was obscured. "Masks" was introduced later in the study because I did not want to introduce physical masks until the participants had already performed numerous times and were relatively comfortable with their surroundings.

The sixth and final exercise of the study was called "The Mirror." It was the only exercise of the study that required participants to perform as soloists. Participants were required to play a one-to-two-minute solo while staring at themselves in a mirror without breaking eye contact. If eye contact was broken, I would blow an air horn to notify the other participants in the room that a "mistake" had been made. Subjects were asked to do this exercise twice; in their second performance, they were asked to mask themselves with materials from the previous exercise. The intention was to create a higher-stress environment in which subjects were the centre of attention and it was possible to make mistakes. It also provided another opportunity to examine how masks might affect performers and whether or not masking helped subjects in higher stress environments. The original intention was to provide a performance experience with an audience. Because it proved difficult to move the participants into a space where an audience was gathered, I instead used the other participants as audience members. I then used the mirror to create a higher stress environment in which I could gauge how impactful, if at all, physical masks were during the performance scenario.

Research Findings

Research findings in this study were based on the analysis of subject questionnaires, interviews, and recorded performance exercises. The primary areas of focus for the questionnaires and interviews were the subjective feelings of connection and communication with other players, feelings of inhibition or insecurity when performing, and the sense of connection to one's instrument. The questionnaires allowed these different aspects to be analyzed across the six different performance exercises while the interviews allowed for subjects to discuss their experiences in greater detail. The questionnaires utilized a ten-point Likert scale in which 0 indicated that participants strongly disagreed with the questions/statements and 10 indicated they strongly agreed. Because the practice of free improvisation relies heavily on effective communication and connection with others, much of the study focused on these areas, examining how, if at all, instruments/masks aided in establishing stronger connections and more effective communication.

Most participants throughout the study noted feeling a connection with the other players in their group throughout the study. While this feeling did vary from exercise to exercise, it was strongest in the Voice Alone exercise and lowest in the Instrument Switch exercise (participants ranked levels of communication on the 10-point Likert scale questionnaire with an average of 7.8 out of 10 in the Voice Alone exercise and 5.5 out of 10 in the Instrument Switch exercise). What is interesting with this result is that, though these exercises were designed to disrupt the relationship between participants and their instruments, both resulted in strong responses in terms of feelings of group connection, with most participants scoring these exercises either very high or very low. While Voice Alone scored highest for feelings of group connection, it was also the most divided exercise in the study, with women tending to have more positive experiences while men's experiences tended to be more negative. For example, of those who claimed the Voice Alone exercise made them feel self-conscious, 90.9% were men even though only 66.7% of the total study participants were men. In addition, it is important to note that all of the vocalists participating in this study were women. It is likely that connection was strong in the Voice Alone

exercise because all subjects were performing with the same tools for the first time—their voices.

In terms of feelings of communication between participants when improvising, the Dark Room scored highest (with an average questionnaire response of 8.6 out of 10) and the Warm-Up and Instrument Switch exercises scored the lowest (with average questionnaire responses of 6.9 out of 10 in both exercises). Despite this, feelings of communication were still fairly consistent across all exercises, though they were slightly lower at the beginning of the study when participants were still familiarizing themselves with the set-up as well as when they were forced to perform with an unfamiliar instrument. Feelings of communication in the Dark Room exercise were significantly higher than in any other exercise. This is interesting given that several participants noted in their pre-study interviews that body language and visual cues are needed for effective communication. Despite these beliefs, participants overwhelmingly felt they communicated the best in this exercise when they were unable to see one another, focusing on their ears instead of their eyes. The mask of darkness proved to be the most effective in opening up communication.

The study also aimed to see what types of masking, if any, aided or hindered feelings of inhibition. These feelings varied across each exercise in the study and were examined with several types of questions. For example, participants were asked to score how inhibited they felt during each exercise and whether they felt safe taking musical risks. Feelings of inhibition were lowest during the Dark Room and highest during the Voice Alone exercise: when asked if they felt less inhibited performing in the dark, participants gave an average ranking of 6.6 out of 10 in the Dark Room and when asked if they felt less inhibited performing using only their voices, participants scored 4.8 out of 10 in Voice Alone exercise. When asked if they felt safe taking musical risks, participants felt safest during the Warm-Up, with an average questionnaire response of 7.0 out of 10. The Dark Room was a close second for feelings of safety with an average response of 6.9 out of 10, while the participants felt the least safe during the Voice Alone exercise, with an average questionnaire response of 5.0 out of 10. What is curious about these results is that the vocalists in the study did not inflate these statistics. While one would expect the vocalists in the study to feel less inhibition when all participants were using their voices, this was not the case. In fact, only one of five vocalists in the study noted that they felt significantly less inhibition and greater safety taking risks in the Voice Alone exercise.

Another interesting aspect of the idea of masking in these exercises is that subjects responded quite differently in the Dark Room than they did in the Masks exercise. For example, subjects felt more connected and less inhibited when performing in the Dark Room. In contrast, when wearing masks, which interfere with one's ability to see the other performers in a natural way, participants felt much more inhibited and less safe taking risks. While these responses were not as low as in the Voice Alone exercise, they were significantly lower than in the Dark Room exercise: participants scored 5.8 out of 10 when asked if they felt less inhibited in the Masks exercise and 6.6 when asked the same question in the Dark Room exercise.

Feeling inhibited and more self-critical was, not surprisingly, more evident in the Mirror exercise where there was an average response of 7.6 out of ten for feelings of inhibition and an average response of 7 out of 10 for feeling self-critical. Women were more affected by these feelings than men: women had an average response of 8.2 out of 10 for feeling inhibited and 8.1 out of ten for feeling self-critical.

One of the unique aspects of the Mirror exercise was the involvement of the other participants as audience members. Vocalists generally had the most negative experience with the exercise

and specifically noted feeling more inhibited because of the audience component. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this exercise was that responses changed for vocalists when participants performed the exercise while wearing a mask. While the majority of participants noted that they felt no difference when performing the exercise with or without a mask, vocalists (and to a lesser extent, women) noted that wearing a mask made the Mirror performance easier, resulting in them feeling less self-conscious when performing. When vocalists were asked in their questionnaires (which took place immediately after each participant performed this exercise) if they were less self-conscious when performing with a mask, they scored average of 7.2 out of 10. When asked if the Mirror exercise was easier when wearing a mask, they responded with an average of 7.4 out of 10.

If our instruments are our masks, it makes sense that vocalists, who lack a physical instrument separate from their bodies, felt a boost in comfort and confidence when wearing a literal mask. When questioned about their instrument, the vocalists in this study were clear that their voice while performing was an instrument separate from themselves despite not being visible. The physical mask, however, offered the comfort and protection that a physical instrument normally would, exemplifying the concept of masks providing power. Without the mask, most vocalists had difficulty feeling comfortable performing. They felt inhibited and self-conscious. Once they were given the option to don a mask, however, there was a transfer of power allowing them to overcome those feelings to a certain extent.

As previously mentioned, there are a number of musical artists and ensembles that use masking in their performances—Björk being one of them. During an interview, the singer stated, “I wear masks because . . . it’s a way to hide and reveal. With phones and selfie culture—I can [always] hear the click of phones—it’s weird energy. With masks I feel protected” (Iannacci). While the participants in this study did not have to contend with phones and photographs, they did have to navigate performing in a distracting environment with the arguably “weird energy” born of looking at themselves in a Mirror while others watched and listened. The questionnaire and interview responses showed that most vocalists in the study felt largely the same as Björk: they felt protected, and that sense allowed them to take advantage of the mask’s ability to conceal and reveal.

As previously discussed, mask relationships work in many ways. In the context of free improvisation, instruments function like masks: as transformers. In my dissertation, which examines this subject more deeply, I stated that “instruments, like masks, allow musicians to transform, revealing different parts of themselves and expressing themselves in ways that are not achievable through any other mechanism or means” (Ladano 135). To study this phenomenon further, participants in this study were asked questions intended to reveal different types of instrument relationships. I was interested in asking questions like: do instruments allow participants to “be” or “portray” someone else when performing? Do instruments allow musicians to reveal or express different parts of themselves? Do instruments allow for a feeling of greater security when a performer is on stage?

When asked if their instruments allowed study participants to “be” or “portray” someone different, 47% agreed at least somewhat with 27% completely agreeing. Vocalists, percussionists, and guitarists were most likely to identify with this concept. Participants were quite varied in their idea of what “being” or “portraying” someone else meant to them. Emulating a specific musical style, the sound of a specific composer, the personality of a celebrity, or an alternative fictional persona created in the moment were all mentioned. In fact, two participants spoke about creating a persona in the moment during the Masks exercise, largely influenced by the masking materials they chose to wear. Many of the participants, however, did not relate to

the concept of being or portraying someone else at all. Some participants felt this concept was relevant for them when playing composed music because they could emulate a specific composer or performer. Alternative personae were deemed less relevant in freely improvised music, though, where all of one's musical ideas are one's own. Some participants noted that using an instrument to "be" someone else was not an authentic expression and so did not apply to them when improvising. One subject (a male pianist) offered that "In order to [improvise] well, you need to be uninhibited . . . to wear a different perspective that isn't genuine to you—it isn't doing any favours in an improvisational context."

Participants identified more with the concept of one's instrument/mask allowing them to express different parts of themselves. 90% of participants agreed with the idea, with 77% agreeing strongly and 13% feeling it was true in certain circumstances. Women were the most likely to view their instruments as a mechanism that allows for deeper expression and for "being" or "portraying" someone else. 90% of women in the study strongly agreed that their instruments acted as masks that allowed for deeper expression and 50% of women felt that their instruments allowed them to be or portray someone else in certain circumstances. Several participants expanded upon the idea of instruments allowing them to communicate differently and utilize a different process of expression:

- "I think there are certain aspects about my personality that I wish I could express in just sort of a personal social way that I'm far more adept at expressing with an instrument." (male trombonist)
- "There are some things that you can't express without an instrument." (male percussionist)
- "I can totally channel the inner parts of my soul to create something musically that I think represented my thoughts and my current state of mind." (female violinist)

Women were more likely than men to identify with the idea that their instrument allows them to express different parts of themselves and/or allows for deeper expression. Both concepts were also quite strong amongst vocalists (all of whom were women), which is curious considering they do not have an instrument separate from their bodies. As noted earlier, vocalists in this study were clear that their voice while performing was an instrument separate from themselves, despite not being visible.

In order to examine the idea of deriving comfort from one's instrument/mask, participants were asked in their final interview if they felt that their instruments allowed them to feel more secure while on stage or while performing with other people. In response, 60% of participants agreed completely with an additional 30% agreeing in certain circumstances. Only two participants (a male pianist and a male synthesizer player) completely disagreed. Two female vocalists felt the question did not apply to them. Most participants shared that they derived a feeling of security from their instruments and many also noted that their instruments provided them with an element of protection:

- "I've definitely observed in myself that when I'm not standing behind an instrument and I'm in front of a lot of people, "what do I do?" There's definitely a feeling of being exposed when I'm not sitting behind a piano." (male pianist)
- "That's my voice, you know? Even feeling it in my hands, whether playing it or not, is still safety . . . [Recalls an incident from the past] We were all facing in a circle, and I was

across from this particular person and I was feeling attacked almost. So, I had put the clarinet up as literally a shield . . . I do feel safe with my instrument. It protects me.”
(female clarinetist)

It is important to note that these feelings expressed by participants are unique to freely improvised music for them. Many subjects were quite open about how, for example, playing classical music interfered with their ability to express themselves, with their feelings of comfort, and with their perceived closeness to their instrument. Even those that had experience in jazz improvisation, where there are specific structures and rules to follow, noted a marked difference in their levels of comfort with jazz and free improvisation.

One participant commented on the difference in his experience with free improvisation and more structured forms of music is as follows:

- “As a musician, a lot of educational programs are teaching people how to—not necessarily intentionally—but teaching people how to play music ingenuinely, in the sense that you’re often learning sounds that are being imposed upon you. I don’t feel as skilled at being ‘in-genuine’ on my instrument as I am at being ingenuine when I speak . . . that’s part of the reason why I feel it’s a mask I’m secure with—it feels more genuine.”
(male guitarist)

This quotation is interesting in the way it illustrates a difference between strict and free types of performing, and in the way it highlights shortcomings in our current system of music education.

At the University of Lethbridge specifically, several players of electronic and electric instruments—such as keyboard, synthesizer, electric guitar, and electric bass—were used as research subjects in the study. They were chosen so that I could consider relationship differences between musicians and electronic or acoustic instruments. While there were not enough electronic musicians in this study to definitively establish a difference, the research did show a trend toward electronic musicians having a different relationship to their instruments than those that play acoustic instruments. When asked if their instruments allowed them to communicate things that could not be communicated verbally, electronics players scored the lowest: their responses averaged only 5 out of 10 to this question, whereas the overall average was 8.1 out of 10. They also scored the lowest when asked if they viewed their instruments as extensions of themselves, with an average response of 4.6 out of 10, compared to an average of 7.8 out of 10. These responses indicate that performers who use electronic instruments do not share the same close relationship to their instruments that acoustic players and vocalists do when improvising. It is possible that, because electronic musicians are more reliant on additional sounds created via technology (such as with a synthesizer or a guitar connected through a series of pedals), there is a sense of removal from the instrument. In other words, some aspect of the sound produced is configured or reconfigured in a way that is removed from the player. As such, it is possible that the concept of instruments functioning as masks is less applicable to these musicians. A larger sample size is needed to definitively determine this finding.

Conclusion

Like masks, instruments provide players with new-found power. In this study, instruments/masks were seen to provide improvisers with feelings of freedom and comfort, which allowed them to express different parts of themselves. The majority of participants identified with the concept of instruments functioning as masks, especially within the framework

of their instrument/mask as a “transformer.” For most subjects, this meant that they were able to use their instruments as a means of revealing different parts of themselves, and specifically that they were able to express thoughts and feelings they felt unable to access any other way. Many felt that they could use their instrument to create alternative personae, as Carl Jung’s theories of masking explored, allowing them to be someone else while performing. For some, both the transformative and persona-creation types of masking were relevant; they felt that they could use their instruments effectively in either way depending on the circumstances. These concepts were strongest for vocalists and players of acoustic instruments, while electronic instruments appeared to disrupt the connection between player and instrument, significantly lessening players senses of their instruments-as-masks (though a larger sample size is needed to understand and determine this factor more fully).

While this study did not seek to specifically examine how collective free improvisation could be incorporated into music education, its findings suggest several practical elements which could be of great benefit to music students. These include emphases on freedom of expression and social connection; employment of different types of communication; and the sense of connection engendered among players. Study participants were clear that these elements of performance are not attainable to the same extent when practicing other forms of music, and that they are not often explored in conventional music education. Young musicians often struggle with a variety of challenges, traumas, anxieties, and difficulties in connecting with others in meaningful ways. Therefore, the findings discussed in this paper could be useful in music education.

This study helps us to better understand the experience of improvising musicians and demonstrates how different parameters can change their experiences. It also illustrates how theories from other disciplines can contribute to a better understanding of creative and artistic processes. The improvising musician’s mask/instrument helps them reveal, express, and better understand the self, and we can only fully understand ourselves through our connection with others. Collective free improvisation is an important tool for creative exploration and for the building of confidence and communication skills. The connections established in this study between improvised music-making and the power and transformation available through mask wearing certainly indicate potential benefits for anyone who wishes to take part. Through the practice of collective free improvisation, musicians of all ages might access the power of self-transformation and an expanded ability to connect with others, while expressing aspects of their lives that are difficult to express verbally.

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