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The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life, Simon Rose

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Book Review

The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life

Simon Rose
University of Chicago Press, 2017
ISBN 978-1783206735
296 pages

Reviewed by Nick Sorensen

Increased critical attention is being given to researching improvisation. This is explicitly acknowledged by Simon Rose and his book, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life*, makes an important contribution to this growing field of study. From the outset Rose makes his position clear: “Improvisation is a pervasive aspect of being human, in every sphere of life, enabling existence; life without the improvisational response is difficult to imagine.” For Rose, as for many other researchers, these assumptions lead towards interdisciplinary work. My own experience has shown me that improvisation within the bounded disciplines of the creative and performing arts enables us to gain a greater understanding of the human capability to improvise. As Rose points out, “within the globalized context of personal, social, organizational and political life improvisatory practices are apparent and need to become better understood” (9).

Rose’s book follows this model of enquiry using the established and particular practice of freely improvised music as a lens through which to examine what is happening in “real life” contexts where we encounter improvisation—especially the relationship between improvisation and learning and the implications of improvisation for education. Simon Rose is well placed to offer insights across these various disciplines; his writing is grounded in practice. Rose is a professional saxophonist and a teacher of drama and music, he works with excluded students and those with special educational needs, and he has had training and an early career in drama and theatre in education. Written for non-academic and academic audiences, this book will be of interest to musicians, educators, researchers, and those engaged in interdisciplinary enquiry.

Divided into three parts, *The Lived Experience* begins with an overview of improvisational practice as a human activity and as a practice in the arts (generally) and music (specifically). The range of interest in improvisation across disciplines is a feature of contemporary social study and there is a useful overview of the centres for improvisation research. The focus shifts to education in order to explore both the relationship between improvisation and agency within settings where students may feel disempowered and the potential benefits of an improvisation-based pedagogy.

The second part of the book explores some key themes: recognising improvisation, process learning, body, approaches to improvisation, and the capacity of improvisation. A third section of the book contains transcripts of semi-structured interviews with ten leading exponents of improvised music: Roscoe Mitchell, Maggie Nichols, John Butcher, Pauline Oliveros, George Lewis, Mick Beck, Tristan Honsinger, Alan Tomlinson, Sven-Ake Johansson, and Bob Ostertag.

Given the breadth of the subject matter and the range of reference points, one of the drawbacks of the book is that some important issues are given scant attention. For example, the section on Power, which is scarcely a page long, looks at the relationship between improvisation and formal education, yet there is so much more to be said about this topic, particularly concerning the relationships between expert and non-expert practitioners. Similarly, the section on solo musical improvisation doesn’t engage with the dialogue that

the performer may have with the physical environment nor the audience. Another shortcoming is that the book doesn't have an index. Given that such a broad range of concepts and ideas are being dealt with and that the reader is invited to move through the book non-sequentially according to their interests and experience, such an addition is essential.

In the end, these shortcomings are excusable given the breadth, scope, and enterprise of this book. Rose makes a clear case for the importance of critical engagement with improvisation as a phenomenon in order to gain a greater understanding of what George Lewis calls "this ubiquitous practice of everyday life, fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation" (4). The unexplored aspects of this fascinating terrain open up opportunities to build on and extend what has been started here. What is evident is that there is much to be gained from drawing on a wide range of experiences in order to maximise our understanding of improvisation and its potential as both an artistic practice and a lived experience.

Works Cited

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