

Appendix D:

Transcripts of conversations with improvisers

1.

Karl is a Masters student of organ improvisation at the Stuttgart HMDK (Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst)

K: (talking of his teacher) He knows his forms, that's like the basic, but he knows how the organ works - he really knows how that works, and what sounds good together and creates a balance, and that's really amazing.

J: There's obviously a distinction between a 20th century style, modal, and strict Baroque forms.

K: Of course, in here it's not really important that you can make style copies - you have to do it, but, you go out of here and you can play from [the year] 1600 to now, every single composer The idea is to have a broad repertoire of stuff you can make up, .. I mean .. what's the purpose for our daily lives later on? Improvisation is so that you don't have to study each note .. you can't be ... unless you're a really fast learner you can't play Sunday service ...

J: Learning new repertoire for each occasion?

K: You can't do that. Some people can, I couldn't

J: Also, there are situations where you have to play to get the priest from one place to another

K: In Catholic church obviously. I'm Protestant so I don't have to do that a lot. Last year I did three months as a substitute in a Catholic church so I made 16 masses in three months, so you learn to 'get over' time .. and that's kind of cool, and he's a great teacher for that.

J: So, in what way was your former teacher stricter? [refers to an earlier conversation]

K: Well, to be fair, I wasn't interested ... I really didn't do anything ... I was actually afraid of that and I didn't know what's possible. So, he said - "yea, you can do this and that", and I was like, "I don't know how that works" ... and he showed me, but I always had the impression that I'm not allowed to fail ... and we would practice on my pieces actually, and with my teacher now you'll never bring twice the same thing. And, like today, we had three times the same theme? He doesn't want to hear it next week. Except if you really have to present it somewhere .. He wants more ideas, and work with new ideas. It's good ... From the beginning I think you have to learn by heart and see how that works, so, the way I've done ..

J: Like a piece?

K: Like a piece, yes, and really .. brush it, and yes, .. that's your piece. I think I didn't really spend too much time on that.

J: Why would that help?

K: It helps to figure out what's possible. You need, for style copies or for particular styles, you need to learn the vocabularies .. it's important to know your chords. Not only the chords, but the feeling in the hands. That's really important for chorale playing, I think that's the most important ... - that you really know your chords.

J: So it's not just a theoretic knowledge.

K: It's both, I think it's both. It comes hand-in-hand, but ... like the chorale I just played? That was in C major, and I had to play it in G major. So, we have to have the knowledge of ... the score is standing there, but ... what I actually did was, I knew the chords, just singing the chords in my head and doing a harmonisation to it. I didn't read the .. I read the last three notes of each column.

J: So, you just tried to internalise it and get it into the hands?

K: Yes.

J: So, how would you represent that to yourself? Like, kind of in shapes?

K: I don't quite understand.

J: You have to some kind of picture of what you're going to do ... you wouldn't be thinking Ic, Vb

K: No, no.

J: So, you're thinking, like, lines ? Musical shapes or using a physical memory?

K: No... The *règle de l'octave*? Do you know that? That helps, if you practise that a lot.. you know how you get along a scale .. that helps a lot .. and obviously, like a lot of practise harmonising, that helps so, you know where to go. I play fairly simple harmonisations, because I couldn't think what's there, I was just like, 'come through' ... just to get through in the easiest possible way.

J: So, you're kind of going blind.. like - if it comes down then I go up [demonstrating contrary motion]

K: Of course, yes. But, I couldn't have done that three years ago, not really..

J: So, three years ago, you'd have looked at it and thought "I need a way to work out more things?"

K: I wouldn't have started so fast, and ... I don't know ... it's a really hard way to ...

J: It's difficult to describe something when you know it .. I mean, you look at it, and you think, "I know it" that's all.

K: Yea, and that's the problem that [my present teacher] is not the best teacher for beginners probably, because ... you've seen him play?

J: It's quick!

K: It's quick, and it's .. it's ... he's a bit of a genius and you look at it and you think "Oh, right... I can't do that.. What's he thinking?" And he's not thinking at all. I've asked

him this question and .. he can recall what he did, but he can't tell you in the moment.

He's just playing music. At the end he's thinking "Ah, I did that and that, and this and that.."

J: He only thinks afterwards?

K: Yes, he thinks afterwards. And I can play a little bit like him. Not really good, not really like him, but a little bit, in the direction.. , and I can't recall what I did. I really have to write it down note by note ...

2.

Peter is an undergraduate student of organ improvisation at the Stuttgart HMDK.

J: So, you're a bachelors' and you've done improvisation before?

P: Yes, so, before I started studying I took organ lessons privately and sometimes.. I made a small part, improvisation with my teacher, .. but, it was really .. few..

J: A little bit?

P: Yes,

J: And, in what context?

P: Well, I was an organist, so I also played in the services just - techniques for preludes for the chorales and so on..

J: So, really a proper improvisation?

P: Yes... but, really on an easy level

J: How would you describe a beginner's level in improvising?

P: You mean, how did my teacher show it to me?

J: Yes - what kind of things would you do?

P: Yes, with my teacher we would work a lot with minimalist music, patterns and so on; so, it's really easy, you just take a pattern, and you do it all the time, then you do then the melody of the chorale to that pattern. So there's not so much thinking work in the

beginning.... and you can improve that with some other chords and so on.

J: But even that - I mean you have to find the right harmony for the chords

P: Yes, the first step is always to harmonise a chorale - to make the four voices

J: And this is already for some people quite difficult

P: Well yes, and I also had some problems with that in the beginning of course. But we also sometimes tried to harmonised some easy Kinderlieder, children's songs

J: Like Frère Jacques?

P: ... something like that, really easy songs with just tonic and dominant

J: And in those kind of tasks, what is difficult.. what is the most difficult thing to do? I mean, what do you find easy and what do you find difficult in those kind of tasks?

P: When I started improvising?

J: Yes, like If we took a Kinderlieder now, what is the easy bit?

P: Well, for me, - maybe this is a special thing for me - but, for me, it was not so easy to *think* easy in improvising. So, I took a children's song which only needs two harmonies actually, but I'm thinking of er.. (gestures with hands)

J: rich, complicated ..?

P: yes, yes, and the problem was I started, maybe the problem was I started improvising too late, I already had literature lessons a long time before and played so many .. real music ... good music, and then I started improvising from level zero, and I thought I have to do the same

J: It has to be the same level as these kind of compositions..

P: And then of course you start thinking "Oh my God, I cannot take only C major, G major.."

J: So there's what we would call like a musical, cognitive - a thinking element which is thinking first of all "I have to make these pieces into a proper composition, like a

Bach Prelude and Fugue”

P: Yes

J: On the other hand there’s an emotional thing which is kind of - a little bit embarrassed..?

P: Yes, yes, that’s right.

J: Do you still find it embarrassing now? Are you still embarrassed to work with your teacher?

P: Yes, for me it’s .. I don’t have too much time to practise improvising and I still have problems to make improvisations ad hoc, without preparation. If I have some time to prepare and to make my thoughts about what I will do, and to think of a form before starting playing, then it can be ok, but I really have problems just to sit down on the bench and to start playing without thinking form, just invent what’s happening, and then yes, create an improvisation during improvising.

J: And by ‘form’ you mean, what, a harmonic plan?

P: Yes, form can mean everything, so of course, also an harmonic plan, but - yes, if I want to improvise a fugue, to have a plan when I will bring the theme in the bass or, I don’t know.. on which tone it is on etc..

J: When your teacher improvises, do you think he has a plan before, or is it just..?

P: (laughs) Yes, I am asking him questions like this a lot, and I think - he also tells me that, it’s just.. it’s an experience - if you do it a lot, you just get it in your fingers, that’s the exposition .. after the exposition, you know, yea, what you can do, and then you don’t have to think about it a lot that you bring the last theme on the sixth tone all ways - it’s just automatic ... also the fingering of some intervals and so on: you don’t have to think about it, you know, ok, the next thing that I want to do is to bring the theme in F major.. now I am in D major or whatever, and then I can make an interlude

and then I don't have to think about ...

J: So, all this working out has been done in a way in advance, at an earlier stage in his life.

P: My level is maybe, during improvisation, ok, I'm thinking I want to bring it in F major now, but I'm in D major, then I start doing (laughs) any cadence without a plan .. where I can go with that, and then comes the next cadence - oh no, it's still not right, and maybe I arrive, and maybe not..

J: How much do you practice? A week?

P: Last time, I didn't practice at all (laughs).. but I try to do it at least once per week.

J: I have the impression that it's not something that you really enjoy?

P: Yes, it's still more embarrassment for me..

J: Even on your own, when you're practising?

P: It starts being embarrassing for me when I know there is a teacher beside me who knows exactly what mistakes I make. It's not so bad if I just improvise for myself, and I'm doing things and it doesn't matter what mistakes ..

3.

Henry is a contemporary classical composer and pianist who also improvises during live recitals with friends.

H: We [refers to a cello and piano duo] did the concert first-half the written pieces, the second half we just improvised that. We normally did the improvisations such that we didn't decide anything in advance; so we took the full risk of just going on stage with out knowing what we would be doing.

J: So, you didn't agree a style, you didn't have kind of graphic score ...

- H: We did do pieces with semi improvisations. ... Stockhausen's *Plus minus*
- J: That must be quite stylistically restricting.. I mean you can't start introducing tonal ideas
- H: It's very restricted improvising!
- H: Over the years we started to do improvisations and normally we did them only in concerts, because after playing something and *then* improvising you ride on the wave of adrenalin. You have already established a connection with your audience ... and we have taken the habit if ever we have any success and applause from the audience we go on stage and improvise.
- J: The connection with the audience is somehow important with improvisation.
- H: It is. It's that feeling of walking on a line without the safety net ... For me, I'm always trying to find the structural connection. ..
- J: Often improvisation is perceived as being a lesser form of music-making than composition because it takes place in real time. That people don't have time to really organise their material. But you find it [the aspect of real time] quite stimulating?
- H: I find it very stimulating because evidently you cannot organise it *per se* as you would do in a Beethoven sonata where motivic, logical things become like a big sudoku - everything locks together. That aspect complicates it, but you compensate it with some other approach to structure. I'm fascinated in that. Of course I realise that ... I do spend time while composing at the piano, so when I then improvise I throw in some thing from a composition that I'm working on.
- J: In a way you're practising composition!
- H: Yes, and it's almost a bit selfish because, by doing so, I sometimes found new solutions to my material that I was working on as a composer; because I throw it into a real-time situation ... it's a very healthy way of testing your material.

4.

Wolfgang is a contemporary composer, organist and professional improviser

W: All this stuff, it's good to know and it's good to learn this, but it's very theoretical; in practice improvisation finally works more on ... when the fingers know 'I'm in this tonality and I only have two black keys, or one black key, the rest is free...'

J: Ok, so you have a kind of visual grid in your mind; like this one is just F-sharp so it's G-major kind of feel and everything else is free?

W: You have to find a way... if you think "I'm in G minor and there's the possibility to go to D minor" .. if you think [like that] it never comes out a good improvisation. You have to find a way to stop thinking and improvise free.

J: So, a conscious decision: "I'm now in G major and I'll head towards to D minor" this would as you say kill the process?

W: My teacher [refers to formal training in historical styles of improvising] would have said 'You have to know both' and, of course, he is right. You have to know the theory and it's good if you know this theory; because then, if a thought comes during improvisation like "Oh, now this is G minor" then, this thought, if you know what you're doing (in theory), then this thought, which is coming up, doesn't block you. You also have the right thought to continue and can forget it again. I think it's a mixture finally, yea?

J: It seems you would have your own system of thinking which doesn't get in the way. So, for instance, you said "two black notes; one black note" - this is a kind of theoretical thinking but it's your own version of theoretical thinking?

W: No, it's a modal thinking.. like in baroque music or earlier. Also, in classical music it's not so different, you think in tone ... up and down, yes? And in romantic music it's

even easier because you only think in diminished chords. Like in Reger, ... it's very easy to improvise in this style because you think in diminished chords. And there's just three of them. And if you have the three of them in the fingers it's very easy to improvise in a romantic style.

J: It's also this kind of French modal style [refers to Messiaen's modes of limited transposition] as well, which is kind of open harmonies. So, it would be more difficult to improvise in a diatonic system?

W: Probably, yes, because here each other note it's a tension note, and you can bring in all other notes between but you feel it as a tension and it [resolves?] to one of these notes finally, yes? And it's very simple because there are only three chords yes?

J: That's what I noticed in this French romantic model, is that they're often moving from black note [scale or system] to white note, black note to white note kind of systems; and there's always a feeling of tension, always a feeling of moving forwards but it's very free. It's much harder for me if you have this square, diatonic, 'fugue-system', 'g minor' you know, the relation of consonance and dissonance ...

W: It's different thing if you want to play this Bach-style of improvisation: you have the counterpoint, you have the second theme [entrance] on the quint [fifth], it's almost impossible without practice; but we practiced this.

J: You did?

W: We did an improvisation course and we practised this. In all the tonalities.

J: And this kind of practice, does it take some time to build up fluency?

W: One or two years minimum.

J: Do you remember when you started improvising?

W: I started to play in the church at 6 years old. And there you have the basis to improvise, yes?

J: So, the position of playing the organ in church suggested to you to improvise?

W: Yes, because you even have to improvise before the choral starts, to make a Praeludium.

J: In front of everyone at 6 years, That's very early to start!

W: Yes, my father was the teacher there.

J: What was your experience of improvising then. Was it what we describe as playful engagement, or was it stressful? Can you describe it?

W: It could be very stressful when you start a tonal thing, and then you lose the tonalities and you can't find it back! On the other hand if you forget this and come in with a Messiaen style it's not so difficult, because you just keep the [harmonic] tensions and you don't resolve them in this style.

J: Ideally, one would like, as an organist, an improviser, to feel free to choose, not to be pushed towards one style or system that is less stressful..

W: Yes, but it depends on you, how you start. If you start 4 bars in Bach style it seems a little strange if you then move immediately into another style. You have to know what to do.

J: I have a kind of ideal with improvising, which is, as you say, to not turn the page. You start a fugue by Buxtehude and think "Ok, today, I'll just continue this"

W: I think this is very helpful for every musician for every piece to try to learn this at certain points. It also gives you a feeling for the quality of the piece, because you immediately feel that the melodies you are inventing are a little boring compared to the composers - at the beginning. It brings you more respect for what's written, and on the other side it helps you with the interpretation.

J: It helps you understand the choices they [the composers] had to make?

W: It's one thing to improvise on the organ, and another thing to improvise in a free-jazz

quartet. Which is one of the most free things in a musical life - this conversation with three other people. Then you go for the energy, not the harmonies; you use the harmonies to put energy.

W: When you improvise, or when you half-improvise, you are in the position in the moment to do what you feel, what you really want, what is coming from inside in the moment. If you play a score you are in the position to fulfil the wish of somebody else. To know about both of these things well, that is the most important thing for a classical musician's training in my opinion, for the future.

5.

Paul is a retired school music teacher, who regularly taught (theoretical) harmony up to A-level. He improvises at the piano.

J: So, you've been teaching, you've been doing harmony for a long time. So, you're comfortable with the whole idea of 4-part harmony.

P: Yes, absolutely

J: And you taught it to schoolchildren?

P: Yea, GCSE and A-level students. A lot of A-level students, latterly.

J: Normally harmonising Bach chorales?

P: Harmonising Bach chorales and Mozart string quartets

J: Written rather than improvised

P: Absolutely. None of the students were expected to improvise.

J: So, if we look at any phrase from the left-hand page that doesn't have harmony and pick one phrase. If we play.. what techniques would you use to construct a harmony to that?

P: Looking through the first piece on the page. The cadences are all pretty clearly marked and ..

J: So, you look at the cadences first?

P: Yes, well I look for the line of the phrase and we're starting in E major and going to some sort of cadence and then still in E major and we're going to a dominant cadence and then,, and stuff like that, and so...

J: You're thinking quite theoretically in a way,

P: Yes.

J: But also practically?

P: Yes, practically.. what notes am I going to play

J: You're not just going to set of on a random chord structure

P: I might.. I might set off on a fairly random chord structure because the first four notes are the same! So, just trying to get a bit of interest out of that.

J: So, would you already have a kind of plan - what to do with those four notes?

P: Well, dominant - tonic - dominant - tonic is the basic outline of the plan I suppose. And then, just trying to make it interesting.

J: When you picture a chord - the chord you use - can you describe the kind of mental image that you have?

If you think of the chords that you might use for those first four notes

P: Well ... yea.. I mean it's obviously a chorale melody which could be harmonised for Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass but I don't play the parts in those ranges particularly. I'm happy to get parts which are far too high for the tenor or too low for the bass, and when I play...

J: Do you imagine it written down?

P: ... (thinks) ... not really, no.

J: You think more in terms of maybe a few notes here and there, but more hand shapes kind of thing?

P: Yes.. and a bass line. I'd like to get ... an interesting bass line. I mean (??) tunes that start with the same notes repeated that repeat the same chord! (demonstrates) but I don't think that's what I'd do here at all.

J: And Bach would never ..

P: And Bach would find something more interesting to do. And.. of course Bach was great at using all sorts of interesting chords; not just making the thing flow, but actually bringing chromatic notes into the harmony and stuff, just to make the interest. And he often highlighted the words with chromatic chords and stuff like that..

J: So it also depends on what your aims are: I mean if your aim, generally speaking, is to make an *interesting* harmony..

P: Yes, yes.

J: Another perspective - like someone who told me - would be to get people to sing. So they make the harmony as simple as possible just to highlight, just to carry the melody, and to encourage people to learn the tune.

P: Yes, .. if people were supposed to sing along without having the tune written out in front of them, then you'd have to highlight the tune and not confuse it with ..

J: So, two very different objectives..

P: Right, yes, absolutely, yes.

J: So, instinctively, yourself, you'd be looking for variety ... what are the more alien or remote chords that I can get in?

P: If I could, yes, if I can. Sometimes it just doesn't work, but ... yes, that would be ideal.

J: Ok. Let's try a phrase then, try the first phrase.

P: Rightho.. (plays, and laughs) I was heading in the wrong direction. I need an extra beat to get from here (plays) to here (plays).

J: Ok, before you do, how do you picture the correction?

P: (thinks but doesn't answer)

J: The thing is, we normally just use mental processes, we just use them to do it. But if you can just pause and try to focus on what you're using .. to correct ...

P: This first cadence is interesting of course, the melody note is in the subdominant - which is not a very common - you usually have an imperfect or an interrupted cadence at the end of the first phrase in particular; and you might have something more interesting later. But this one has the most peculiar cadence first. So.. I suppose I would go for the cadence I used then.. I can't think of anything more appropriate ... I don't really want to modulate to the subdominant, so .. going to ... the supertonic might be better .. especially considering what's coming at the beginning of the second phrase.

J: When you use these theoretical terms - subdominant, supertonic - do you have a chord picture that goes with that?

P: Yes, if I'm going for a dominant chord I know exactly what it's going to sound like, I'm going to head for that chord (plays) and that's going to be the final chord. Or, if I'm

going to head for... (plays) which is the one I think is the best .. the most interesting thing I've thought of so far (laughs) for this first phrase.

J: When you use the term supertonic - if I say supertonic, does that automatically bring a chord to mind?

P: Umm.. (thinks for a while) ... (laughs) ... it depends on the circumstances, I mean it could just be .. well the supertonic comes in so many useable chords in this context, but we're talking about a cadence and ... so ... we'd normally be looking at I, IV or V as the final chord of the cadence, and this isn't. You wouldn't want to end with V7 (plays) ... you can't. So, it's got to be something else: subdominant or supertonic.

J: Ok, so these different alternatives, do you picture in terms of hand movements on the keys, or...?

P: Yes, a bit ... but I like to see where the harmony's going.

J: In terms of..?

P: In terms of progression. So, I've chosen the supertonic chord for this cadence because the next is likely to be on (??) and then tonic, supertonic, dominant tonic: II, V, I - it's such a common progression in everybody's music, that - everybody's tonal music, that it's bound to work!

J: Ok,

P: I wonder if I can get to that cadence without (laughs) needing an extra beat or something (laughs).

J: I'm interested because I never think in these terms: II, V, I, supertonic, things like that.

P: Ah! Oh well, I've got a whole raft of progressions which come over and over again in Bach-style music and Mozart; a whole raft of progression of two, three, or four chords which I used to advise the students to use because they were so commonly used by Bach and others,

that if they stuck to those progressions ...

J: When you say that, and I think, of course, that's the thing, and I would use it in the same way as you do, but I never think, I never name it in that way.

P: Oh right, well perhaps I only name it because I've taught it so many times.. It's perhaps not for my own benefit, but for the students benefit that I name it ... yes.

J: I wonder if that influences the way that you picture it - but from what you say it doesn't seem to, it seems to be something separate..?

P: I try to listen to inside parts as well, and see if there's some progression that's smooth and interesting; or not necessarily interesting but a nice smooth progression of inside parts. And a bass part particularly.

J: Do you can find that you can, what they call, audiate? You can hear where it's going before you play?

P: Yes. Exactly, that's just what I'm doing.

J: So, you don't have to construct things in an abstract, theoretical way? You can hear the possibilities?

P: Yes, yes (nodding, agreeing). Oh yes, I'd heard the opening four notes which are the same, in my head. And that cadence I'd heard - it's what happens a couple of beats (later??)

J: So, you can hear something, but it's a case of what is it that I hear?

P: yes ... turning that into playing something (laughs). I think I knew what it was going to be, it's just that I didn't approach it very well (laughs). So, I do have these stock movements which - they are both in my head - I could scribble them out very quickly - or I could play them very quickly in any key, because they are such stock moves.

J: Is it possible to describe: if you think of II, V, I, as a stock phrase; is it possible to de-

scribe how that little progression is represented in you mind? ... When you recall that - how do you recall it as information?

P: I can hear it, in my head. And I can hear it in various different ways, you know: are you going to use IIb or II7b, or ... is the dominant going to have a suspension in the middle parts; is it going to have a 7th on the dominant? So, yes .. there are lots of variations on the basic stock phrase, but I've got the sound of it in my head.

J: The sound of it, yes, but going beyond the sound ... Can you possibly describe another kind of mental representation? Like an image or graphic?

P: Well.. I'm not so good at doing it now - practically .. because I haven't taught A-level music for the last 8 years. I haven't done any harmonising chorales or anything for the last 8 years and you get out of the habit.

J: Yes, but I'm interested in how you actually recall that information in a way that allows you to do what you just showed me.

P: (thinks a long time.. then laughs) I don't know to be honest. I really can't put it into words. There must be a lot of finger memory, you know, the shapes of chords ... I have these stock moves in my head; I've got the sound of the chords, which I think is there, certainly just before I play them. Sometimes the whole stock move is there in my head before I play ..(for example) the four chords