

Improvisational Theatre as a Tool for Enhancing Musicians' Expressiveness

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the importance of rethinking the concept of *expressiveness* and how we approach it in higher music education (HME). It highlights that current teaching practices often focus on acoustic elements of performance, while overlooking the visual ones, despite evidence that ancillary gestures, body movement, and facial expressions can significantly impact the perception of *expressiveness* in music. Drawing on embodied cognition and theatre approaches—particularly improvisational theatre—the paper explores how these practices can support musicians in developing expressive skills. Improvisational theatre provides a flexible and safe environment for musicians to explore new ways of playing their instruments, allowing them to engage with and embody diverse emotions, as well as to abstract expressive concepts that they link to their repertoire. This may enable students to effectively connect sound, movement, and expressive intention, and communicate with audiences more convincingly. The paper also acknowledges challenges such as the need for specialized educators, interdisciplinary curricula, and openness to explorative teaching approaches, advocating thoughtful implementation to enrich and broaden teaching approaches to *expressiveness* in HME.

Keywords: music expressiveness, emotion, embodiment, theatre, improvisation

Rethinking 'expressiveness' and teaching approaches

Expressiveness is a consistently discussed topic in higher music education (HME), but its definition remains ambiguous and there are remarkable differences in how the term is conceptualized (Fabian et al., 2014). A substantial body of literature revolves around emotion as an essential component of expressive performance (Gabrielsson & Juslin, 2003; Juslin & Laukka, 2003; Juslin & Sloboda, 2010; Van Zijl et al., 2013; Weintraub, 2016). Others adopt a broader view, also considering atmosphere, ideas, imagery or motions associated

with the musical work (Meissner & Timmers, 2020). Weintraub (2016) argues that ideas, imagery, or motions can also be linked to emotions and that emotions are, therefore, at the core of any expressive performance, while Fabian et al. (2014) state that seeking to delineate *expressiveness* from emotion might make it more concrete and attainable for some individuals. This persistent conceptual ambiguity poses significant challenges for both students and educators.

Despite varying conceptualizations, there is a general consensus that *expressiveness* is achieved (or rather perceived) through the manipulation of both acoustic elements such as articulation, dynamics, or tempo, as well as visual elements like ancillary gestures, body movement, or facial expressions (Davidson, 2007; Fabian et al., 2014). Yet, in HME, most teaching approaches to *expressiveness* focus primarily on the acoustic elements of performance (Juslin & Petri, 2000; Juslin & Sloboda, 2010), neglecting the visual ones, despite growing evidence of their critical role in the perception of *expressiveness*.

The role of visual elements in expressive performance

Expressiveness is not only heard but also seen. Research has shown that musicians' motor behaviour during performance is a significant source of perceptual information, as it helps audiences better differentiate musicians' expressive intentions and often serves as a performance quality indicator (Davidson, 1993; 2007; Waddell & Williamon, 2017; Tsay, 2014; Rea, 2015). In fact, according to Davidson (1993, 2007), visual information perceived through the musicians' movements can indicate *expressiveness* more effectively than purely sonic information. Juchniewicz (2008) found that physical movement also increased ratings of sonic expressive elements such as phrasing, dynamics, and rubato, providing evidence of the influence of

visual elements on the processing and perception of sound.

Beyond enhancing the perception of expression, visual cues can also influence how audiences evaluate performance accuracy. Studies by Behne & Wöllner (2011) and Rea (2015) confirm that it is relatively easy to manipulate perceived sound through what is perceived by the eye, leading listeners to overlook or “forgive” a performer’s mistakes when these are accompanied by a confident facial expression (Waddell & Williamson, 2017).

The interplay between sonic and visual elements also affects how convincingly emotions are conveyed. In a live music performance that combines acoustic and visual elements, contradictory body language can influence how the audience perceives what the artist is trying to convey through the music. Visible physical tension in a joyful theme, excessive movement linked to a sad motive, or lack of animation during an upbeat tempo may affect the audience’s perception of the performance (Rea, 2015). Allingham and Luck (2022) found that “different approaches to body movement can affect ratings of audible expressivity”. For instance, restricting movement reduced perceived expressivity in ‘sad’ melodies, while in some cases reduced movement enhanced expressivity in a ‘happy’ melody. Similarly, Van Zijl & Luck (2013) showed that “distinct emotions are often associated with certain qualities of body movement”. Taken together, these studies suggest that movement interacts with the emotional character of the music in nuanced ways, rather than simply increasing expressivity by itself.

While there is still limited understanding of how particular movements can express emotional content in music (Saarikallio et al., 2024), many musicians agree that emotional expression requires the performer to feel the emotion internally (Lindström et al., 2003; Persson, 2001). This idea is not new, as it is in line with historical perspectives already present in the Baroque era, such as the “doctrine of affects”. In addition to supporting the idea that music had the ability to arouse affective states within the listener, the “doctrine of affects” also provided instructions on how performers could better convey affective states to the listener. For instance, in his treatise “True art of playing keyboard instruments” (1753) C.P.E. Bach wrote:

“A musician cannot move others if he is not moved himself; therefore, he necessarily needs to be able to induce himself all emotions which he wants to arouse in his audience

[...] In languishing, sad passages, he becomes languishing and sad. You see and hear it in him.”

These perspectives contrast with sonic-centred models of *expressiveness* by recognizing the body and its affective experiences as vital to expressive performance (Bania & Skowronek, 2020). However, inducing emotions in order to express them is a challenging process. Although musicians often use different approaches to it, they are not always successful (Van Zijl & Sloboda, 2010). Furthermore, if musicians engage themselves in intense veridical emotions, their performance could be negatively affected. According to Gabriëlsson & Juslin (2003), musicians should “strive for emotional identification but still have some conscious control of performance”, while Wöllner (2017) suggests that musicians must *act as if* they are experiencing certain emotions. When musicians learn to do that, audience members are moved in ways similar to their emotional involvement when watching actors in a theatre play.

Broadening the framework for teaching expressiveness

The conceptual ambiguity presented earlier and the overemphasis on acoustic elements of performance when teaching *expressiveness* in HME pose challenges that need addressing. Furthermore, instructional strategies often lack clear goals, specific tasks, and systematic teaching patterns (Karlsson & Juslin, 2008; Meissner, 2021; Nieto, 2015). Some scholars have suggested that the reason for this might be that a musician’s knowledge of expressive skills is often tacit or intuitive (Chávez Prado, 2016; Lindström et al., 2003; McPhee, 2011; Meissner, 2021) and therefore cannot be easily taught. As a result, learners are often expected to acquire these skills on their own and intuitively.

Given the strong evidence that visual (embodied) elements play a critical role in the perception of *expressiveness*, there is a clear need to rethink *expressiveness* and broaden the framework for teaching it. The previous section suggests that understanding the relevance of the visual elements in performance, as well as the constant interplay between acoustic and visual elements, can enable musicians to better connect with their audiences. However, developing control over such interplay and learning to master it requires a more explicit process of thought (Minafra, 2021), along with embodied educational strategies that address it properly. Inspired by Wöllner’s *act as if* concept and

their comparison to theatre, the following section explores theatrical approaches to *expressiveness*, drawing parallels with musical performance to identify transferable practices that could be used as teaching strategies for *expressiveness* in music.

A glimpse into theatre approaches

The belief that performers must embody affective states in order to arouse them in the audience is also central to some of the most renowned theatre training approaches. For centuries, theatre training techniques have used physical exploration (motion) to stimulate imagination and create affective states (emotions) in actors. These approaches allow actors to engage emotionally and mentally with fictional circumstances (Kemp, 2012), facilitating development of *expressiveness*. Konstantin Stanislavsky, the creator of the 'Method' (method-acting) stated that acting comes from *living through* (embodying) the given circumstances of a part (Clare, 2017). Similarly, Michael Chekhov, another influential theorist, emphasized "proprioceptive awareness of movement as a path to attaining psychological states relevant for embodying characters and inhabiting fictional spaces" (Olenina et al., 2019).

Theatre methods such as Stanislavsky's or Chekhov's are grounded in embodied cognition theories. These theories claim that physical experience shapes conceptual thought, and this is always contingent upon the body's interactions with both the physical and social environments in which it is immersed (Kemp, 2012; Schneegans & Schöner, 2008). Cognition is generated by a continuous body-mind relationship in which the moving body constantly interacts with the environment. Consequently, consciously chosen physical activity can lead to attaining affective states and help individuals understand and therefore express an emotional truth (Kemp, 2012), facilitating communication with their audiences. This is also true for music, since bodily movement also shapes the way we feel, experience or understand music (Leman, et al., 2018). For that reason, embodying emotions that musicians link to the repertoire while playing their instrument—or rather using the musical text as a script they need to embody—could enable them to connect movement-sound-expressive intention in a meaningful way (Bremmer & Nijs, 2022). Such strategies could also extend to the expression of more abstract concepts, such as atmosphere, ideas, imagery, or motion associated with a piece of repertoire.

Improvisational theatre: a promising tool for musicians

Even though theatre strategies may provide useful tools for teaching *expressiveness* in music, their direct application to music training is not without obstacles. If such approaches are to avoid posing additional challenges for music students, their strategies should be integrated with the specifics of music performance. One way to facilitate this integration is to focus on a feature common to many theatre pedagogies: the use of improvisational exercises to develop skills that can later be applied in scripted roles. In this respect, improvisational theatre offers a more flexible and accessible framework that closely aligns with the spontaneous nature of musical performance.

Improvisational theatre (improv) is a form of unscripted performance that relies on individual and group spontaneity as a means for creation. Unlike traditional theatre, where actors work with pre-written scripts, improvisational theatre actors create the characters, dialogues, and narratives on the spot, usually based on prompts provided by the audience. Viola Spolin, American theatre academic and educator, unknowingly laid the foundation for this groundbreaking form in the 1950s and improvisational theatre soon gained worldwide popularity. Spolin's premise was the following: "Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and learn to become 'stage-worthy'. We learn through experience and experiencing only, and no one teaches anyone anything" (Spolin, 1963). While in standard theatre the 'outcome' might be paramount, in improvisational theatre the 'process' (experience) takes precedence, serving as the basis of any insight the individual may acquire.

During an improvisational theatre performance, actors give propositions (whether verbal or physical) to one another and slowly move the narrative forward in co-creation. There is no pre-agreement, and every detail of the interaction is completely made up on the spot and built upon what is previously said. There are several principles that allow individuals to do this successfully (Jackson, 1998; Drinko, 2016). Although different sources have described them slightly differently, I would like to summarize them in three main principles, based on my experience as both an improv trainer and trainee: 'Here and Now', 'Accept and Build', and 'Make your Partner Look Good'. Each principle is described below, along with its practical implications.

- **‘Here and now’**: for co-creation to take place, improv actors need to stay fully present, avoiding distractions from the past or future (Drinko, 2012). To achieve this, active listening serves as an anchor, as it helps individuals ground themselves and react to their surroundings appropriately. Active listening is one of the most important skills that improv training focuses on.
- **‘Accept and build’**: commonly referred to as ‘Yes, and’, this principle means that improv actors must accept what is offered in the scene and add to it, going along with what is first suggested (Jackson, 1998). This requires minimizing judgment towards their partner’s offers as well as their own impulses, while letting go of pre-conceived ideas or expectations.
- **‘Make your partner look good’**: although not always explicitly discussed in improvisation literature, this principle can be viewed as a logical extension of the previous two. In my teaching practice, I emphasize this concept as a distinct and vital principle. Spontaneous creation requires a sense of trust that allows individuals to embrace vulnerability and take risks. Focusing on making one’s partner look good fosters collegiality and enhances the effectiveness of the core principles.

These principles foster an environment of mutual trust, effective collaboration, and expressive risk-taking, freeing individuals from approval or disapproval mindsets and encouraging them to explore their identity and find new ways of self-expression while engaging with others without feeling judged (Spolin, 1963). These features can benefit both solo and ensemble performance.

It is, however, in the acting practice itself that we can find key elements to potentially enhance musicians’ *expressiveness*. For example, improvisational theatre exercises can help musicians engage with and embody different emotions represented in the musical work and learn how to physically portray the changes between them. As seen in Czepiel & Luck (2018), emotional engagement can lead to improvements in both technical and expressive performance in musicians. In their research, they observed that while musicians engaged with the specific emotion they linked with the music, their general movement increased, especially in expressive areas of the body, such as the torso, head, and shoulders. Moreover, jerkiness and visible signs of nervousness were reduced in technically difficult parts, resulting in smoother and more fluid playing. Participants

even claimed that they felt ‘freer’ and ‘as if mistakes did not matter’. This suggests that the effects of ‘emotional engagement’ during performance could potentially improve musicians’ experience, as well as the outcome and audience’s perception of it. This could be taught effectively through improvisational theatre exercises that focus on portrayal of emotions. Nevertheless, as previously stated, abstract concepts such as atmospheres, ideas, imagery, or motions, could also be explored through similar means. In improvisational theatre, actors are not constrained by a fixed script, predefined roles, or physical form. For that reason, actors can inhabit a wide array of expressive concepts, fostering imagination beyond physical limits. This could enable musicians to connect with different ‘ways of being’, no matter how different from the real form, and therefore, different ‘ways of playing’ their instrument. Trying to embody atmospheres, ideas, imagery, or motions while playing their instrument can allow for new insights on how to move for expressive purposes, and provide them with wider flexibility to adapt their motor behaviour to the requirements of the musical piece.

Considerations and challenges

While an approach based on improvisational theatre may offer significant benefits for many musicians, practical research is needed to test its feasibility. In addition, it is essential to recognize associated challenges, particularly within the context of traditional conservatoire pedagogy.

For example, exposing musicians to theatre-based methods may not suit every individual. People with highly introverted personality traits might feel uncomfortable or threatened when encouraged to step outside their comfort zones (Rea, 2015), leading to a detrimental effect. Furthermore, strategies that encourage engagement with emotions should ideally be facilitated by experienced theatre trainers to ensure effective and sensitive implementation.

Resistance from educational institutions may also arise. The integration of these practices requires specialized educators and a shift toward more interdisciplinary curricula. Moreover, it steers away from traditional models of instruction such as the one-to-one lesson format and the master-apprentice model, instead advocating for group work and a more explorative way of learning.

Finally, since improvisational theatre techniques are rooted in spontaneity, they conflict with the common belief—especially prominent among

classical students—that there is a ‘right’ way to perform a piece of repertoire (Ford, 2013). Nevertheless, providing a space for experimentation within formal music education where students can move beyond technical proficiency and break free from learned frameworks, may foster creativity, and a more authentic performance (Spolin, 1963), allowing individuals to discover new modes of expression through direct experience and ultimately, empowering students.

While fully replacing traditional methods is not needed, broadening them by integrating embodied tools, such as improvisational theatre, could significantly enrich how *expressiveness* is understood and approached in HME.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the relevance of visual elements in creating an expressive performance and emphasized the role of the body in teaching strategies for *expressiveness*. It also explored the potential of improvisational theatre techniques as an educational tool for this purpose. Improvisational theatre can help musicians engage with and embody different emotions, which may lead to improvements in both technical and expressive performance (Czepiel & Luck, 2018). These exercises can also stimulate imagination through body movements (Zinder, 2007), connecting an individual with a different sense of “self” (Petit, 2009). This may help performers connect with more abstract expressive concepts, such as atmosphere, imagery, or motion, making improvisational theatre-based methods a promising tool for teaching *expressiveness* in music.

While challenges such as the need for specialized educators, the implementation of interdisciplinary curricula, and the openness towards a more explorative way of teaching and learning *expressiveness* require thoughtful planning, the urge to broaden teaching approaches to *expressiveness* is non-refutable. Improvisational theatre could be a stepping stone towards implementing more embodied pedagogical approaches in higher music education.

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