



Music of the Moment

I say jump, you say cheese!

Workshop on group improv and circle singing at The Royal Academy of Music, Aalborg nov. 14-16 2013

What is improvisation?

When engaging oneself in improv I think it is appropriate to take a moment and consider *what* it is and *why* you wanna do it? I have found, through the years, that the concept of improvisation may take many shapes and interpretations. One person said: "It is putting together phrases you learned in a new way", another person that it is "singing freely selected notes from an appropriate scale". A classical pianist, that "it is his interpretation of the composers written music". On the other side of the spectrum there are people who think of improvisation as "creating brand new music on the fly", "challenging all boundaries and go somewhere you never went before". Wikipedia states: "Improvisation is a state of being and creating action without pre-planning." Bobby McFerrin often says: "Going from one note to the other". The answers ranges from "interpretation under restrictions" to being "completely free". What they all have in common is leaving something open to the individual choice of the moment.

I enjoy improvising! And that should be enough reason to do it. But as a teacher and artist I need to ask myself; why am I bringing this playful, process oriented and daring approach into peoples lives? On stage, in the classroom and at the choir rehearsal.

- ▶ **WHAT QUALITIES DOES IMPROVISATION HAVE?**
- ▶ **WHY SHOULD I USE IT IN MY TEACHING?**
- ▶ **HOW WILL I USE IT IN MY TEACHING?**

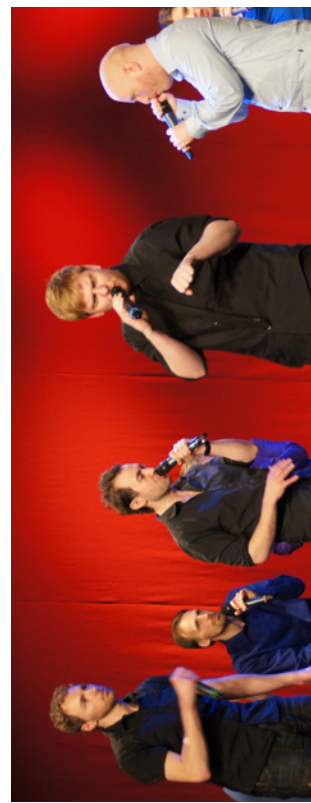
I am asking these questions because it is good pedagogical practice always to have a goal in mind when choosing exercises and approaches. But I am also asking these questions because I think improvisation is really a continuum going from "leaving *one* thing open in the music" to "*Everything* is open! Let's not play anything anyone ever heard before. No key. No rhythm. No-nada-nix-known-nothing." and I want you to consider when and why the qualities of improvisation are coming into their own. Especially when using it in front of an audience.

- ▶ **WHAT QUALITIES DOES IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE HAVE?**
- ▶ **WHICH SETTINGS OR APPROACHES BRING OUT THESE QUALITIES?**

If there is a higher goal with what we are doing, it could be simply "making good music" or it could be "connecting people in singing" or it could be "spiritual journey, inner alignment and free flow of chi". What ever your answer might be, it is important to be aware of. Also as a group working together.

- ▶ **WHAT IS THE HIGHER GOAL OF SINGING TOGETHER?**

Ok. Done asking questions - let's move on!



Entrainment - Autonomy - Mastery

Autonomy

Compared to conventional choral music, (group) improvised choral music alters one very important parameter of the whole system. It gives *autonomy* to each singer. Conventional choral music is predetermined by sheet music and rehearsed ideas, whereas improvised music is determined by the independent contributions of each singer. Each singer has been assigned autonomy over *which*, *what* and *when* to sing. It is this autonomy that becomes so wonderfully freeing - and the same autonomy so darn frightening! Therefore we need to address this autonomy and learn how to manage it. Apart from managing the new freedom we also need to learn how to navigate in the music - now that we don't have a score or a conductor to refer to anymore.

Let's leave the idea of autonomy for a little while and talk about two other things.

Entrainment

Entrainment is a universal concept appearing in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and more. It is defined as "as the tendency for two oscillating bodies to lock into phase so that they vibrate in harmony." or "a synchronization of two or more rhythmic cycles". Entrainment is quite evident in music, since most of our mental effort concerns synchronizing harmonic frequencies and rhythmic cycles in the music making. I therefore see *entrainment* as a foundation of the music making, the higher goal of the music making and a constant reference point harmonically, rhythmically and - well - spiritually or interpersonally. The more areas in which we *get in sync* - the more entrained we are. The more entrained we are - the closer we get to fulfilling the higher purpose of the music. Ta-daaa! Well - that is my definition anyways.

So, we have Autonomy and we have purpose. But to fulfill this we can't leave out ...

Mastery

Everyone can improvise. Yes, they can! And improvisation can be considered an independent skill to be practiced. But improvisation is something you do with *something* - and in our case it is *sound*. Let us dare to restrict it even more - let us say we would like to include conventional musical parameters like tonality, puls, subdivisions, meters, chords etc in our tool box. Now, to qualify our improvisation we need qualified technical skills. We need technical skills *like the back of our hand* - otherwise the autonomous contributions will be 1) Out of alignment or simply out of context. 2) Thought out, and lacking the spontaneous quality.

Mastery of our voice (instrument) and some ear-training is required - at least to a minimum - but frankly speaking, it takes a lot of musical skill to make qualified improvised music. Funny thing though, the unique qualities of making stuff up here and now tends to transcend anyways, and I have experienced some improvised amateur performances more interesting than same-level arranged performances. But no doubt, mastery of our technical skills and musicality is crucial.

Now, let us leave mastery. Mastery is something we achieve in another classroom. Today we will only make use of the skills we already have and we will use them ingenious and creatively. Yei!



Video: 32 metronomes synchronizes (Entrainment)



Video: "Ain't We Sweet". From Kristian's debut concert.

Managing Autonomy

Mastering technique doesn't do it alone. Lots of classical trained musicians has outstanding technique, but wouldn't know how to transform it into improvisation. We need to learn how to manage autonomy and it calls for the musician and the composer in us.

Connecting with your own source

The source of music has vanished, or more accurately relocated. The source used to be sheet music or the like, but in improv no external source is dictating you. You must find the source within and connect with that. Further down I have some exercises and games that addresses this. Expanding openness to the source is also expanding your toolbox of sounds and "textures" and as you develop more varieties and a unique sound catalogue, you will be able to choose more qualified responses to the present situation.

- ✓ JUMP SHOWERS
- ✓ MICHAELANGELO'S STATUES
- ✓ GIBBERISH IN TONGUES

Connecting with the collective flow (entrainment)

When working in a collaborative situation, it gets more complicated since there is more than your own source to consider. There is everybody's source which ideally should take off and fly in formation. This is where the entrainment concept is a good reference. We should seek to connect our individual paths with the collective flow. And in that, keeping a mutual inspiration path and openness in both ends. Our individual contributions always flexible for change in the collective, the collective always flexible for new impulses from the sources.

I purposely use the entrainment concept instead of stating "we need to be in tune" or "we need to follow the same pulse". Being in tune and grooving is one way of being synced up, music is broader than this - even though we often choose to sync up in these two areas. Let's broaden our concept of what music is and stay open for ideas that challenge the conventions, but keep the ideas connected to the higher goal: entrainment.

- ✓ ENTRAINMENT CLAP
- ✓ ONE CHAOS ONE / 4 DIRECTIONS
- ✓ MOVEMENT EXERCISES

Navigating in improvised music

Now that we have connected to our own source and the collective flow the hard part is to *navigate* in what sometimes seems like an ocean of sounds. Too much sound, too many impulses no coherence - how do we make this music fly in formation?

Impulses

Just start singing - works great when practicing your 1st circle. But creating a piece with others - collaboration - the collective music needs coherence. One approach is to listen for external impulses to react upon. Look or wait for something in the music that moves you to comment. And your comments might turn into your own musical flow, which you keep open and flexible for the new impulses you can react to or incorporate. When making a groove, you can think of it as a chain reaction. One part's movement becomes the impulse for the next. Actually moving physically can be helpful. Pretend the musical phrase hits you - what is your counter reaction? And when soloing on top of something, I find this principal very helpful too. If you



Songs of the Moment NORDIC: Soila Sariola has a moment.



Video: SOTM NORDIC: Mystique in Helsinki.

connect your solo part to a phrase in the music - commenting that phrase, dancing with it - your solo has a direction and will become a part of the music instead of sticking to the music.

- ✓ **GIBBERISH CONVERSATIONS**
- ✓ **DIPPEDUT JAM**

Frames

In the next chapter I will discuss the use of frames when practicing improv. But even without having decided on a specific frame beforehand, some sort of frame will most likely appear. This frame is also a reference and a landmark to navigate after. When kind of knowing which frame you are navigating within, you can bring forth the appropriate tools from your box. Keep in mind though, that frames are not necessarily meant to be respected. You - or somebody else - might purposely challenge the frame's capabilities. And this just might be where the magic happens ...

- ✓ **SINGING APPEGGIOS**
- ✓ **EVERYBODY MIMIC ONE PERSON**
- ✓ **... MAKE UP YOUR OWN!**

- **Connect with something in the music.**
- **Only contribute when the music asks for it.**
- **Be flexible - in your mind and in your body.**
- **Allow yourself to be seized by the music.**



Facilitating improvised music

Frames

When facilitating improvised music (as a teacher) I think the best approach is to create frameworks which the singers fill in. The frames free's us from the paralysis we might face, when asked to "improvise". The frames also provides a way of practicing musical structure. And they allow us to actually rehearse the idea of improvisation without practicing specific music. The frames allows us autonomy but within a structure that helps us focusing and connecting with the collective.

What is a frame?

A frame is any set of direction into which we manage our autonomy. A circle song is a framework. Rhythm jam over Taco - Señorita - Chihuahua is a framework. Singing tonal music, is a framework. Ah Le Le is a framework. Frames might be more or less restricted. They are just ideas that limits and directs each singer's individual source into something collective. I encourage you to make up your own frames and let your singers bring in ideas too!

Finding musical inspiration - connecting with the source

✓ **THE 3 CIRCLES**

Consider your awareness and presence, and consider where it is directed. The 3 circles defines 3 areas to focus your attention - and from which you may gather your inspiration. Circle 1 is yourself. This is pretty much as described in "Connecting with your own source". Circle 2 is your colleagues, your collaborators. When you let yourself be influenced by their impulses and the energy and playful fun you might build up between you. Circle 3 is the audience. I think in a inspirational sense

it could also be interpreted as meta awareness, like the notion of structure, form or even the frames discussed above.

✓ JUMP SHOWERS

Everybody sings in the shower! Now let that cheerful, unconcerned creative outlet become your most exercised activity. Everyone standing in a circle. Turn on your showers (yes, do the hand gestures and sound). Jump to the right on a signal. Start singing when you hit the floor. This is an individual exercise, and preferably don't listen or interact with your neighbors. Each time the signal sounds, everyone jumps to the right - into a new shower = new type of song. The idea is to jump into a stream of music and become the media of that. Let yourself stand aside and explore the sounds, rhythm, melodies that comes out of your mouth. You don't have to like it. It is just musically doodling. But try to get into the flow and keep singing, keep being curious on the sounds.

✓ MICHAELANGELO'S STATUES

Michaelangelo had this idea about the statue being trapped inside the stone. His job as an artist was to free the statue - not creating it! This idea places the responsibility of the product to something external and it is an "outside-in" approach. Combine this way of thinking with Jump Showers, and think of the statue as little patterns. Hence you jump into the raw stream of inspiration (the stone) and from the energy of your shower you cut away the clutter and free your statue.

✓ GIBBERISH AND TEXTURE

Language is something we all master and it is full of music! Gibberish is made-up language, and it seems that everyone are capable of doing it - and even having their own unique style. Let gibberish become a source of inspiration for you as you make you gibberish become (slightly) melodic, following the innate melody of your phrasings. The pitfall is to add melody to your gibberish. Don't! Let the gibberish be the controlling part.

✓ ALTERING THE PHRASE

Make up a little phrase - 1 or 2 bars - in gibberish and let it become a chorus. As the group sings the chorus, every second time one singer sings a variation of it. Keep the variation close and coherent to the original. Think of this as a folk song. The chorus keeps stating the lessens of the song, the lead singers adds more information the the story. But it is one story. Keep it close. (Rhannon exercise)

Composition & circlesongs

Wether you are the sole creator of a circlesong or you are blessed with autonomy in a flat collaboration, some general compositional ideas might come in handy. Here in the realm of pattern-repetition.

❖ ENGINE = MOTOR (+ INTERLOCK)

The engine of your piece is a pattern that provides the groove. Something that defines the rhythmic structure and preferably makes your piece have a circular feeling. The *motor* is the start pattern. The initial idea. It might be sufficient, but maybe it needs an interlock to create the circular feeling. And *interlocking* pattern is one that finds the gaps in the motor and at the same time has a driving quality.

❖ THEME / RIFF

The hook line of the circlesong. This hook line is often harmonized. It is also a great place to connect your soloing to. Arrange on the fly by muting the theme out and solo in a call response manner.

❖ IMPULSES

Base your pattern ideas on interacting impulses. Let one patterns movement become the course of the next. (See above description)

❖ DRONES

Not the flying war kind, but as in one note kept throughout pattern. The drone could be the bass-note, or the drone could be in the middle of the harmonic spectrum. The drone might be rhythmified, and it is a great offspring to make advanced chords, or beautiful progressions.

❖ REPETITION LENGTH / OVERALL REPETITION LENGTH

Consider the repetition length of your patterns. The longest will define the overall repetition length of the piece. Making use of several repetition length may give the composition a depth to it, and singing the same pattern every 2 beat, might be exiting if another pattern is providing rhythmic or harmonic change over 4 bars.

❖ TEXTURE

Gibberish and the choice of consonants and vowels can be referred to as texture. Consider the texture while making a song. What “materials” are you using? Make the materials be coherent or complement eachother. Like Altering the Phrase, use texture that unify the piece.

Circular / linear element of a circlesong

It is quite easy to look at a circlesong in a vertical way and perceive it as a layer of patterns. From my studies of Bobby McFerrin's circlesong concerts 1997-2008 I am convinced that this is like saying the wind is in the trees (because that is where it is visible). I consider the layered patterns of the circlesong only a vehicle of the journey that a circlesong should be. From the cradle of the first idea to the end. In this time the creator has moved energy and told a story on his way to the end. This story is the essential. It is a story which hopefully includes the singers to be seized in the music and the collective flow to interact with the creators source.

I call this the linear element of the circlesong. And it is embodied in the creators soloing during the whole song. Consider the solo the real story and the patterns the characters. Tell the story and remember to explain why the characters are brought into the story. Interact with the characters. Let your solo flow become the actual song, and the patterns your playmates.

Quick advices on facilitating improv

- ▶ Create a safe atmosphere in which it is aloud to make mistakes, be weird and welcome initiatives.
- ▶ Create frames, in which the singers can explore their voice and connection with others.
- ▶ Unless the frame has been misinterpreted, never correct people! It will make them less spontaneous, less confident, less able to develop.
- ▶ Create an atmosphere of acceptance, playfulness and fun. Welcome weirdness and mistakes.
- ▶ All assumptions of end results should be disregarded. Practice also your own openness towards how your frames are interpreted. Embrace unexpected directions as an opportunity to be improvising for real!
- ▶ I believe teaching technical skills and teaching improv should be separated. Because one is based in the realm of right and wrong and the other one in the realm of creative thinking.
- ▶ Facilitating a favorable atmosphere is as important as choosing the appropriate exercises.

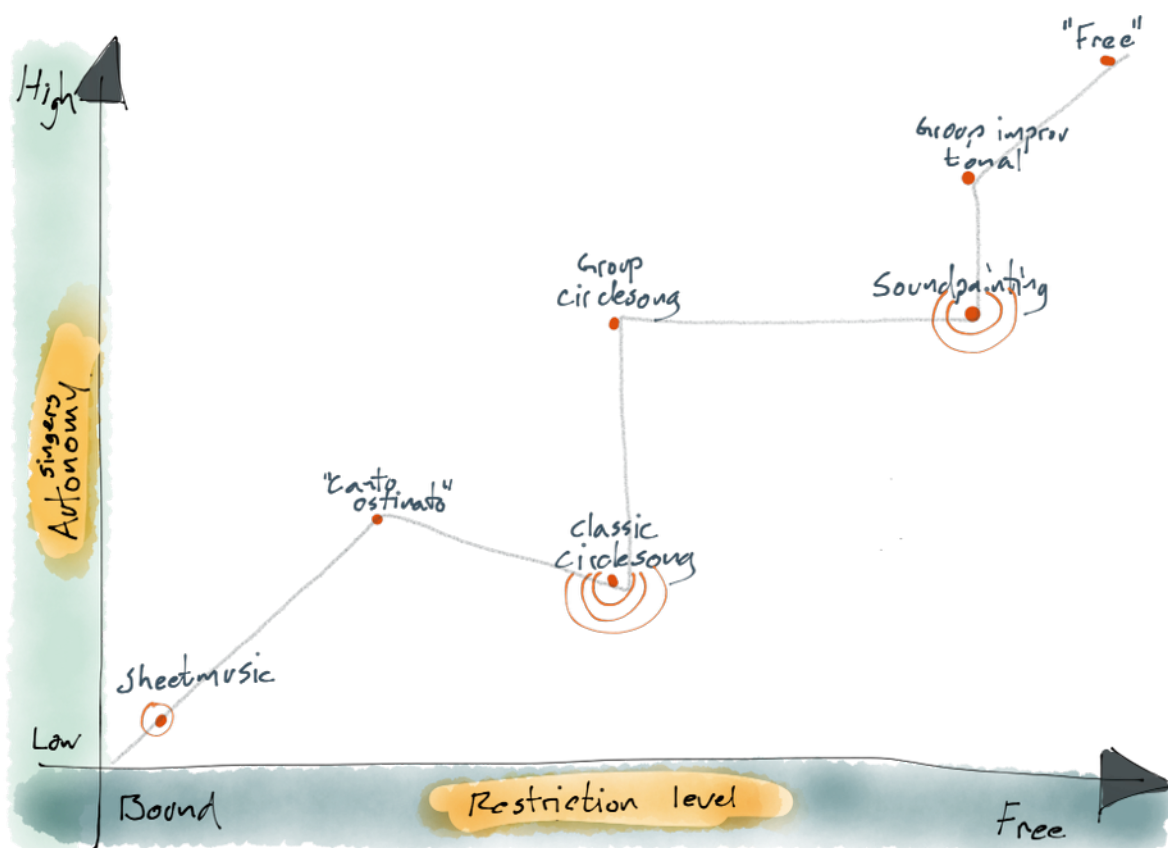
- Kristian Skårhøj, November 2013

More hand outs and videos can be found at kristianskarhoj.dk

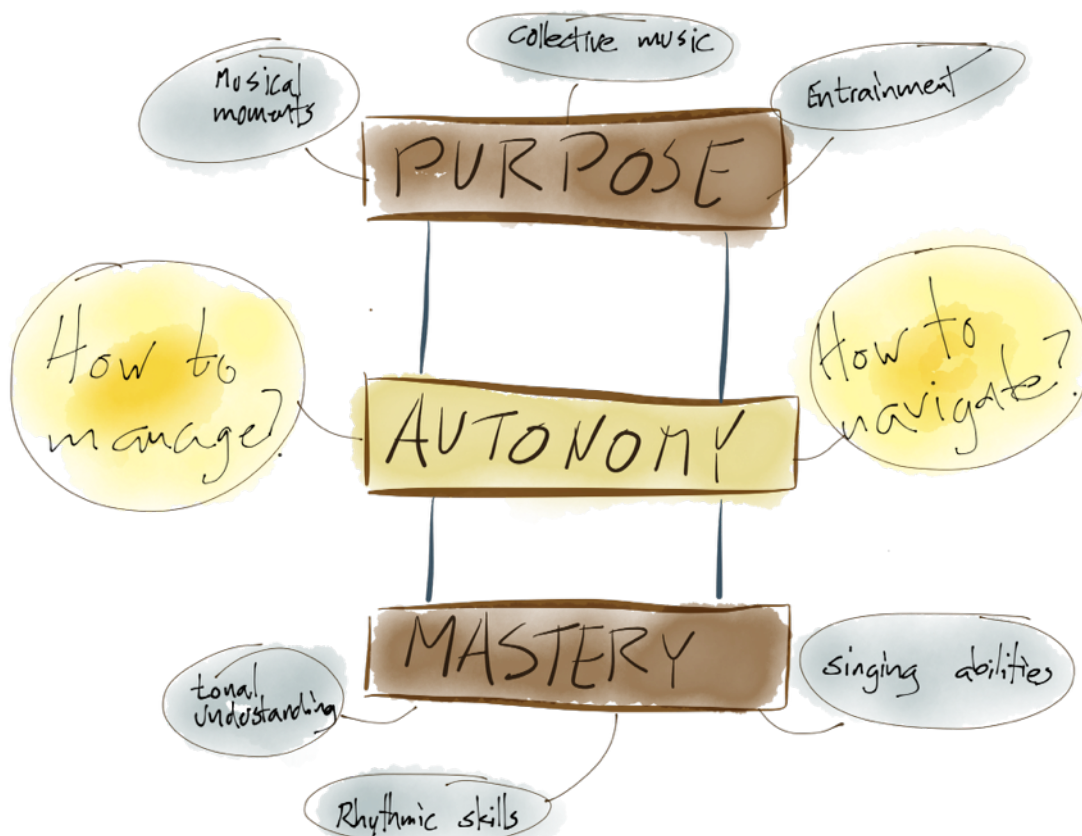


Songs of the Moment NORDIC: Lene Nørgaard and Jussi Chydenius in a humorous position.

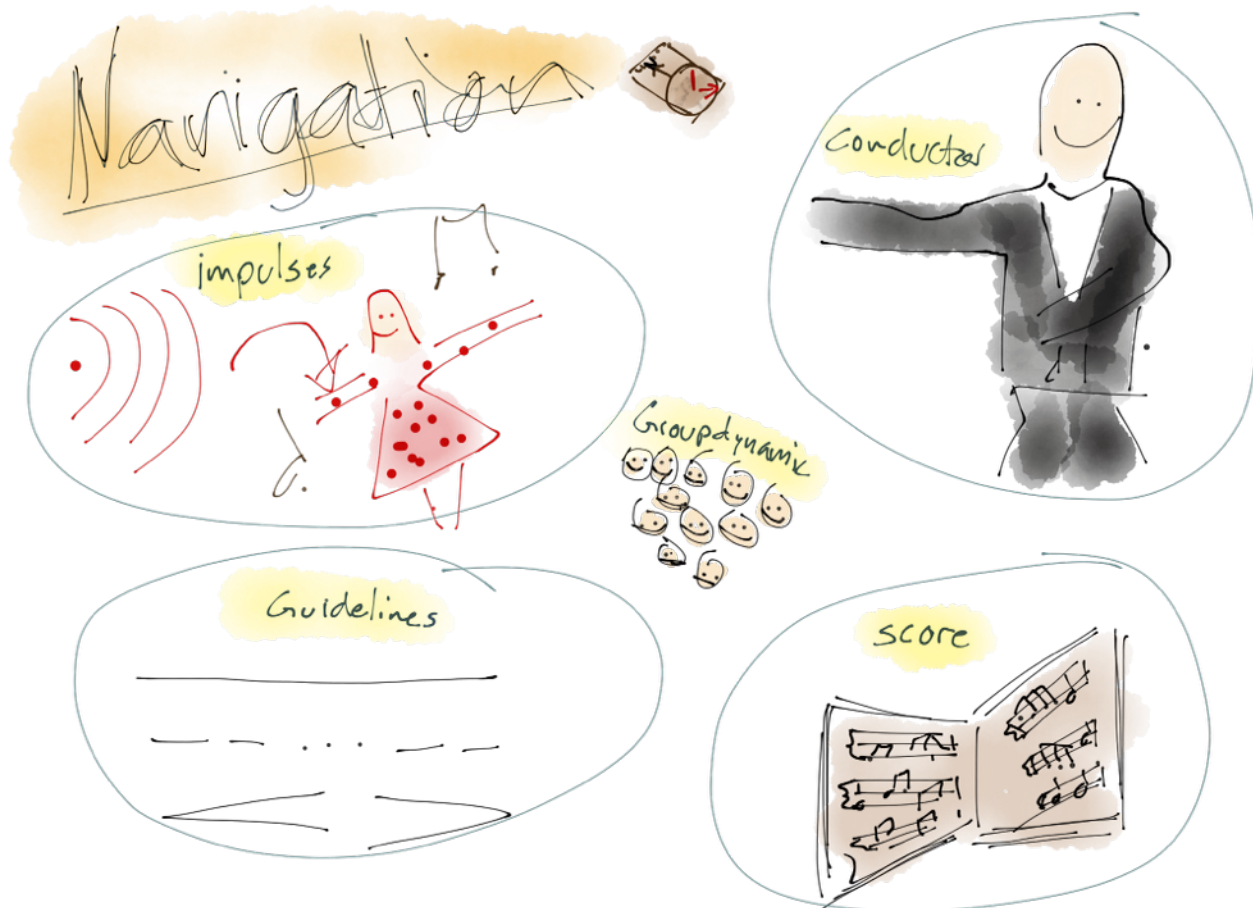
Appendix



Improv genres and autonomy levels. The rings indicate conductor based type.



"Motivation". A rewriting of Dan Pinks ideas about motivation. Autonomy is almost none existing in conventional choral singing. In improv the autonomy is the freeing part, but also challenging. How do we manage our musicianship to serve the music?



Navigating in music.

2014

DIG DEEPER ...

- ▶ DEVELOP YOUR SKILLS
- ▶ CHALLENGE YOUR ABILITIES
- ▶ CONNECT WITH OTHER SINGERS

IMPROVISING IN GREECE

ONE WEEK

Aug. 31 - sep. 7, 2014 (week 36).
more info: kristians25@gmail.com