Circlesongs

The Artistic Dimension
RAMA Campus November 9-14, 2015

Classes with Kristian Skårhøj

Songs of the Moment
sing. connect. improvise.

Exercises

✓ Interpretations of a Name
✓ Altering the Phrase
✓ Trading Patterns (1 on 1)
✓ Count to 10
✓ Build a groove (Body Perc to Voice)
✓ Collaborative melodi
✓ Speed Patterns (Shifting feeling)
✓ Musical showers
✓ Akka Snakke Snik Snak
✓ 4 Directions
✓ Exploring your voice
✓ Battle of the Statues
✓ Creative Cards session

Keywords

Circular element
Linear element

Telling stories
Make a conversation with your pattern
Beginning - middle - end
Variation - listen for the spaces - make a conversation (Tell the story)

Soloing & Composition
Seed - motive - variations
Gaps, space and connectedness
Entry pattern - Balance pattern
Language! Almost as important as tonality and tempo.

Around the camp fire

Tell Me a Story!

I will invite you to tell me a story. As in all good stories it has a beginning, a middel and an end. You will bring characters into the story - main characters and sidekicks - but when you do, you need to connect them to the plot. Your story - of course - is not told with real words. It is a musical story - an abstract journey - into an atmosphere, energy, a place or a feeling.

In the beginning you'll set the scene. That is soloing with your voice. Explore your "musical shower" or define your "stone" (in which there's a statue). Here you'll find your seed for the song. The very element from which the piece will derive. The mother of all patterns. Play around with the seed - we can also call it by its musical term: *Motif*. Either simplify or expand the motif to become a pattern. I call this the **entry pattern** - and this is your first character of the song, which will be carried by one of the sections in the choir.

Now put this character into play. Make a conversation with it. How? By answering the character's (motif's) statements in the gaps. Remember to keep the conversation in the same language - or something that could be the same language. Also remember that, like in any conversation, it is polite to listen before you speak. Listen and answer. Make space for your character.

A character is defined by certain characteristics. In our case, these are the "energy points" of your pattern. Usually these are the accents of your patterns. Be aware of your patterns energy points - and let them move your narrative. That usually means start your phrases right after an energy point.

Now you can bring another character into the story. What kind of character this is, depends on what kind of story you want to tell. It could of course be a shadow element - a harmony connected to your entry pattern. Clumsy Hans had 2 brothers (all 3 desired the princess). Goldilock met 3 bears. The 3 Billy Goats Gruff fooled a troll. But your next element (pattern) could also be a contrast element, like Goldilock, the princess and the troll all are plot characters that defines the other. In my terminology - this is where you might bring in a **balance pattern**.

The balance pattern's feature is to cover the space and gaps of the entry pattern. Optimally in such a way that the energy points of each pattern is "pushing" each other, like planets gravity fields are influencing each other in the solar system. The balance pattern fills out the space in the entry pattern, and the two should feel connected and complimentary to each other. Also seek to give the whole a circular feeling. Say for instance the first pattern ends 2 beats before the repetition. Then the balance pattern should somehow fill this space and travel through it - so that all phrases don't end in one point, but takes over for each other.

You should also consider the overall repetition length. This should be 2-8 bars. A good way to do this, is to have a one-bar rhythmic pattern repeated 4 times - each time with a new harmonic variation. Especially bass parts works great this way, and gives the circlesong a longer life and puts the shorter patterns into new context.

Now put the characters into play in your story. Solo just one pattern at the time! Maybe even mute one of the patterns in and out while creating call-response relationship with it. But stay focused to which elements (pattern) of the music you are having a conversation with! This will make your solo way more coherent with the music and help everyone to know you are still telling the same story as you started.

This is the middle of your story. This is where Clumsy Hans and his brothers competes to win the heart of the princess. This is where the 3 Billy Goats Gruff goes to the meadow and back. This is where the characters in your story are being put into context. This is where you will solo the patterns and put them in and out of play.

At some point the story reaches and end. It could be a long tale of post-echoes of motifs, or it might be a crescendo to a big bang sort of thing. Which ever - find a suitable ending for your piece. Now your are a musical story teller!

The Circular Element vs. The Linear Element

I like to talk about the circular element and the linear element of a circlesong. The circular element is pretty much the compositional part - the vertical part. This is what you would write down. if you transcribed the parts. But this alone is (usually) not very interesting in an artistic performance situation. It is of course a huge part of your musical end product, and needs to be practiced - but what you also need to practice is the linear element. Your storytelling!

Why do you improvise? What is the essence of improv? I think one part is flow and process. And I believe it is essential to invite your audience into this process. Maybe it is awkward or unaccustomed for you to think out loud - musically - but we need this stream of consciousness to create the flow that will take us on a journey with you and your music. It is also a way to keep renewing your patterns - and keep the circlesong alive.

I find that I become a more active listener when I listen to improvised music. It demands of me to follow the process of music creation rather than sit back and receive. I - and everyone else - knows that *no-one knows* what will happen next, and that keeps me interested. The more I can hear and see the impulses and motifs that develop and drive the piece the more satisfied I am. "Oh there he introduced a new motif … and there it was reused in an altered way … and there someone picked up on that cue". The magic of improvised pieces is when you recognize motifs introduced earlier. Don't think you need to create new stuff - always make variations of old instead.

Music is conversation - and for a conversation to happen, there is more to it than repeating 2 phrases over and over. No, the patterns are like statements - which the solist elaborates on. Connect with the patterns - one at a time.

So the linear element is the common thread. It is the storytelling. It is you soloing the piece from beginning to end. It is the song that truss the piece from one end to the other. And in this way, they linear element really is the core of the song, not just an appendix - the circular element is your background. The context you set up, in which you tell the story.

When I listen to Bobby McFerrin making circlesongs (which I have done a lot - and actually doing while writing this), I keep getting fascinated by his ability to keep renewing the music with his constant developing of motifs and melodic lines. The patterns are reduced to a sandbox for his momentary and creative solo vocal playground. This is where the idea of "the linear element" started - when I was transcribing 132 of his circle songs in 2008. I ended up realizing that the patterns by themselves were only half the music, and let alone as interesting as a Facebook cliché.

I'm not saying composition (the circular element) is not important. It is. But most often I find that people are so concerned with composing the circlesong's circular aspect that there is no story being told - and I feel like watching a movie without sound.

Circlesongs - and improvised music in general - demands of us to be interested in the musical process the artist is inviting us into. Therefor it also demands of the artist to be in that process, and to invite people into his or her exploration of musical possibility.

Motifs & Variations

Everything is based on variations. Variations are based on a seed - a motif. You get that from … playing around, taking a musical shower, using a texture generator, going from one note to another. Traditionally a motif is a couple of notes in a specific rhythm. But I will invite you to think even broader about what a motif is. Maybe it is just a weird sound. Maybe it is a crack in your voice.

Maybe it is a glissando. Maybe it is that - combined with a couple of notes. A motif is anything you get curious to play around with.

Now, variations of the motif can get you moving and build the rest of the song. This approach creates process and coherent composition. Try it.

Gaps and space

While circle songs can have various structures - from monophonic (Sinene) to polyphonic to polymetric to rubato pieces - one thing that seems to be difficult to most people, though most important: Creating patterns that connect to eachother. "Komplimentærrytmik" (complimentary rhythmic) is a classical musical term. Simplified it means - find the gaps of a pattern, and create energy points here. The far-sighted and experienced circlesong creator might create an entry pattern with spaces - for soloing and to leave room for a balance pattern.

Simplify! Make spaces. Find the energy points - have phrases and sololing connect to the entry pattern by filling out the spaces.

Language (texture)

Gibberish - it is your best friend! Because the illusion of language provides intonation and rhythm to you, and it is a constant source of inspiration. Forget about melody, forget about rhythm. Speak gibberish - it will give you both.

If you get caught in singing using only one vowel (uh, ah, yeah) - use gibberish.

If you get caught in a mono syllable mode (like jazz scatting "de de de be de") - add new consonants and vowels.

My experience is that people using only one vowel or mono syllables sing like they are playing a piano - concerned about which notes to play. Save that for your scat solo in your jazztrio in 4 choir of Autumn Leaves. If your are soloing a circlesong, we rather here a story and you experimenting with your material - including diftons, tone, texture, motifs, language etc

Have fun and stay loose! :-)

Thank you all for a great week in Aalborg!

- **Kristian Skårhøj**

Exercises from the class room

COUNT TO 10

Setting: Circle (maybe even with holding each other on the back.)

Now the group counts to 10. But just one person at a time. If two persons says a number at the same time, it is started over.

Goal: Tuning into each other. Teambuilding. Awareness. Learning the numbers.

INTERPRETATION OF A NAME

Setting: Group stand in a circle.

First person says his/her name (maybe in a exaggerated way). Next person says the name in an interpretted way. It is not an exact copy of the name. It is not a new way to say the name. It is something close, but different and derived from the original. Usually exaggerations of the phrasing works. This way the name is passed around in the circle until it comes back to the person who send it.

Goal: Icebreaker, teambuilding, making variations basic.

ALTERING THE PHRASE

Setting: Group stand in a circle.

Warm-up: Gibberish call response. Maybe pass around the circle.

1) Leader (or group member) creates 1-2 bar pattern. Everyone learns it as a chorus. Every other repetition the pattern is muted to give space to a solist, who makes a variation of the phrase. Pass the solo around the circle.

Make sure people stay close to the original pattern. Language, style.

2) Simplify. Define a motiv from the pattern. Have people explore that motif.

3) Have the group repeat the pattern continuously - and have people solo on top of it. Try to have them connect to the original pattern - look for the spaces.

Goal: Sing together, awareness of variations is better than new, ability to focus on motif.

TRADING PATTERNS (1 ON 1)

Setting: 1 on 1, chairs, spread out in the room.

Everyone finds a partner - 1 on 1. Place them on chairs (or standing) spread out in the room, as far from each other as possible.

Person 1 creates a pattern - person 2 learns it. Person 1 solos the pattern. Connects with it. Makes a conversation with the pattern. (find the spaces!)

Then the same with person 2.

Rotate person 2 in the room (everyone gets new partner).

Goal: Letting people practice to solo their own patterns without focus from everyone. More people active at one time. *Downside:* too much sound in the room.

BUILD A GROOVE (BODY PERCUSSION TO VOICE)

Setting: Group in a circle. Standing - step back and forth.

Each person is to place a body percussion beat in the loop (either 1 or 2 bars). No beat can be the same! That means - look for the free gaps.

Leader starts. Then next person. Everyone does all beats in the groove.

After about 3-5 beats, the rhythm is closed, and half the group keeps that loop going. The other half continues with filling out the gaps, creating another complimentary groove.

Now you have 2 BP grooves which are "opposites" of each other. They are connected in their spaces. They are interlocking. Like an entry pattern and a balance pattern.

Now ask the group to vocalize the grooves and then add pitch.

Goal: Awareness of space in a groove (analytical approach). Understanding interlocking.

COLLABORATIVE MELODI

Setting: Group in circle (sitting or standing)

1) Each person sings one note - one after the other. Try to make a coherent melody.
2) 2 notes each
3) 3 notes each
4) 5 notes each
5) …

Goal: Presence, build on what was, think melodic. Group awareness.

EXPLORE YOUR VOICE

Setting: Group in circle (sitting or standing)

1) **Tone:** Choose a pitch. Everyone explore the tone of their voice in that pitch. Sing the vowels in between vowels (!). You can repeat this in another pitch.
2) **Space:** Same thing - but add spaces. (Sometimes, stop an listen)
3) **Dynamic:** 1+2+ explore dynamics.
4) **2 notes:** 1+2+3 + explore 2 notes
5) **3 notes:** … add a 3rd note to the exercise.
6) … you can add 4 notes or more.

Goal: Limit the possibilities to force you to be creative.

MUSICAL SHOWERS

Setting: Group standing in a circle

1) Everyone likes to sing in the shower - everyone sounds good in a shower. Why? Because theres is a very special musical energy field in a shower. The shower is providing people with musical energy. (vink vink). Now everyone will try this. Raise hands and spray yourself with imaginary water while making the appropriate sound. On signal, jump, and start singing your shower song when hitting the ground.

2) Group moves one step to the right. Process repeated - now in new shower (= new song/energy)

3) Shift showers in a flow - everyone jumps on signal.

4) Think of showers like Michaelangelo thought of the stone: The statue was already inside - his job was to free it from the clutter. Same with you. The shower is the stone - the musical energy - your job is to free the statue (pattern) already in it.

5) Our statues are like Russian babushkas. They have endless layers inside. Go from one to the next. (making variations)

6) Go to Battle of statues or make a shower-solo for each other (only if group feels safe with one another and they are not too many).

Goal: Explore your voice, explore motifs, do like Bobby - be a linear element, going from one pattern to the next.

Battle of the Statues

Setting: Group standing

This game is based on "Paper, Scissor, Rock" and can serve as a great ending to any session working with creating patterns.

NB: Explain the rules to the group before game starts.

1) Each person in the group creates a pattern ("statue"). (Fx. use method of Musical Showers or Creative Cards).

2) Everyone walks around in the room singing their pattern. When they meet another person, they can battle him or her to win this person over. The battle is done "Paper, Scissor, Rock"-style.

3) The looser learns the winners pattern, and walks behind the winner (now leader of the group) singing the pattern with him/her.

4) The battles continues. When someone wins a battle, they win the whole group to their team.

5) After a while there is only one pattern in the room - the session facilitator can make a circlesong with that pattern - or have the winner do it - depending on the level of the singers.

Instead of patterns, you can use other stuff. Like names or known phrases of songs.

This game works great with big and small groups!

Goal: Having fun! People singing teaching phrases to each other in a safe environment. Teambuilding.

Speed Patterns (Shifting feeling)

Setting: Standing (or sitting) in a circle

Each person creates a pattern right after each other. The patterns need to be different in energy, tonality, feeling, etc.

If needed, set a goal to always go from a minor to a major tonality (or vise versa)

Goal: Develop ability to make contrasty pieces.

4 DIRECTIONS

Setting: Groups i standing, spread out in the room or in a circle.

Teach each direction to the group. Either in one flow (more meditative) or really practice altering between the 4 (fx if the group is less skilled).

When the group knows the 4 directions - have them going back and forth between them in their own pace and stay with any of them for as long as they want. This creates a sea of harmonics, which are the same, but constantly changing. It works great with big groups and mixed genders.

I usually run the session with starting to breath in and out, using the arms going backwards when inhaling, and leading them to the heart on exhale. Exhale on Ah. Ask people to do it in their own tempo (staggered breathing). Give more sound. Actual pitches. Then find a common pitch (Needs to be around keyhole C-D to work later). Then teach Openness. Connect it to the heart. Then teach You, connect it to the heart. Then teach sharing - connect it to the heart. Go through the different directions a couple of times - make sure that the group feels safe with them. Then have people do it at their own pace. Sometimes I ask everyone to start with the heart and end with sharing. Sometimes not. You can also ask people to explore additional pitches and phrases after a while.

This is a rather meditative improv exercise. Depending on your group and your personality, you might choose to focus on different elements of the exercise. If you like it to be spiritual, and your group does too - focus on the energy and the meditational element. If you do not, ask people to have good tone quality and fill the room with sound. As a facilitator you can always decide the focal point of your exercises and fit it to your likings. Either way, it is usually a very good experience for the singers to stand in rich environment of overtones and harmonics, and the postures serves as a kind of solfege system to remember the notes by.
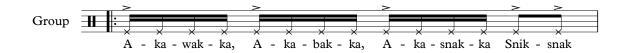
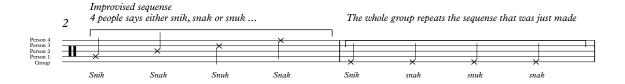| Keyword	Intention / meditation	Posture	Vowel	Scale
Openness	Openness and acceptance of what is and what will come.	Arms raised above your head (receiving).	Ooh	So
Sharing	We are connected to each other - right now concretely though our vibrations in the room - but also in a emphatic and spiritual sense. Share the ressources that you have.	Hands reach out, palms upwards (Giving).	Eh	Re
Love	Love. Breath in love, exhale love. Give love to your voice, give love to your body, give love to someone who needs it, give love to a relationsship that is wounded.	Both hands on your heart. (Breath in with hands going backwards, and lead them to your heart on exhale)	Ah	Do
You	Connect with the core of yourself. It is important that you are present in you. Feel the vibrations from the deep sound you are making. Feel strong. Like an oak tree.	Squat down. Alternately bend over hands on legs/ankles.	Ä	So,

Goal: Singers by them sleves, but connected. Improv light - choice of only 4 notes. Putting intention into notes. Meditation. Group connects through harmonics. Simplicity.
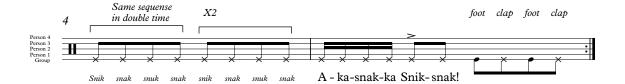
Aka Snakka Snik Snak

Kristian Skårhøj 2014

Group

A - ka - wak - ka,   A - ka - bak - ka,   A - ka - snak - ka   Snik - snak

Improvised sequense
4 people says either snik, snak or snuk …   *The whole group repeats the sequense that was just made*

Person 4
Person 3
Person 2
Person 1
Group

Snik   Snak   Snuk   Snak   Snik   snak   snuk   snak

Same sequense   *X2*   *foot   clap   foot   clap*
in double time

Person 4
Person 3
Person 2
Person 1
Group

Snik snak snuk snak   snik snak snuk snak   A - ka-snak-ka Snik- snak!

Goal
Icebreaker
Improvise in a very safe environment - only 3 choices!
Make group flow and be present.
Practices subdivision layers.

Options
a) Do the exercise 1 on 1.
b) Lower the tempo and use pitches instead of *snik snak snuk*
c) Try with longer sequense fx 6 (In my experience, this is very hard!)
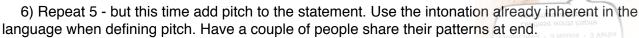d) Walk in whole/half tempo meanwhile

Setting: Group standing in circle

The Gibberish Generator (pattern making)

Each person gets one card. Ask them to look at the "Texture" category. Here they'll find 2-3 consonants.

1) Now, by adding any vowel they like, they can make up gibberish by combining consonants and vowels.

2) Put it into time - have everyone do steps and do rhythm jam on their language generated by the gibberish generator.

3) Pass cards to the right. Repeat step 2 - now with the new language.

4) Repeat - but this time theres no stopping. Call "shift cards" on the 3rd beat of the bar, and everyone has one bar to shift card - to the right.

5) Ask people to jam their way to a rhythmic statement in their language, which becomes a pattern. After this round, ask volunteers to share their pattern.

6) Repeat 5 - but this time add pitch to the statement. Use the intonation already inherent in the language when defining pitch. Have a couple of people share their patterns at end.

This is the recipe to come up with a pattern!

The Poetry Generator (Finding a hookline)

Ask people to look at the big speech bubble. Here they find 9 different words.

1) Have everyone say one word from their cards in turn.

2) You can either pick up an interesting statement from the word round or you can go for a rhyme.

3) If you go for the rhyming session - ask someone to say a word - and the group to rhyme on it. After a couple of examples, tell people to make a whole sentence - with at least one word from the card - and have the group rhyme on it with a whole sentence.

4) Pick any pair of rhyming sentences you find appealing - this is your lyrics for the hookline!

Now have the group create a pattern (using above recipe and choose an appropriate pattern) and then have one person or small group put the lyrics into melody on top of the pattern.

You have a song.

With a large group, divide it into smaller groups of 5-8 people and give them 20-30 minutes to come up with a piece of music this way. Also ask them to consider how they'll start and how they'll end their piece - and if they have time, to refine the piece with breaks, harmonies, dynamics and other musical elements of their likings.

End the session where each group perform their prices for eachother.

Read more about **how to use the cards** here!
http://songsofthemoment.com/gamerules/