

# The development of improvisational expertise in jazz musicians

Citation for published version (APA):

Wopereis, I., Brand-Gruwel, S., & Boshuizen, E. (2015). The development of improvisational expertise in jazz musicians. In J. Ginsborg, A. Lamont, & S. Bramley (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM)* (pp. 847-848)  
[https://www.escom.org/proceedings/ESCOM9\\_Manchester\\_2015\\_Abstracts\\_Proceedings.pdf](https://www.escom.org/proceedings/ESCOM9_Manchester_2015_Abstracts_Proceedings.pdf)

## Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2015

## Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

## Document license:

CC BY-NC-ND

## Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

## General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

<https://www.ou.nl/taverne-agreement>

## Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

[pure-support@ou.nl](mailto:pure-support@ou.nl)

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

Downloaded from <https://research.ou.nl/> on date: 16 May. 2025

Open Universiteit  
[www.ou.nl](http://www.ou.nl)



# The development of improvisational expertise in jazz musicians

Iwan Wopereis,<sup>\*1</sup> Saskia Brand-Gruwel,<sup>\*2</sup> Els Boshuizen<sup>\*3</sup>

*\* Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Open University of the Netherlands, the Netherlands*

## ABSTRACT

### Background

Improvisation –a key to musical performance in genres like jazz, freestyle rap, and liturgical church music– is a complex musical skill that takes many years of intense practice to master. A previous study by Wopereis, Stoyanov, Kirschner, and Van Merriënboer (2013) suggests it requires a mixture of basic musical skill, creativity, affective involvement, regulation, responsivity, and risk-taking. These elements call for a high level of mastery and integration, without which there can be no acceptable, let alone high-class performance.

### Aims

The aim of the present study is to reveal factors that affect successful and less successful improvisation expertise development (cf. Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Two questions were investigated: 1) How do expert musical improvisers develop their improvisational expertise? And 2) Is there a developmental difference between elite and semi-elite professionals?

### Method

Participants were 11 professional piano players. All had studied jazz and improvised music at conservatories in the Netherlands or Belgium. Six participants were elite improvising pianists (n=6;  $M_{age}=45.3$ ,  $SD=4.0$ ; 1 Female), five were semi-elite (n=5;  $M_{age}=44.0$ ,  $SD=5.8$ ; 1 Female). Participants were matched on sex, age, and conservatory class. The two groups appeared not to differ in their perceived musical and improvisational identity development trajectories.

Free narrative interviews were conducted asking the interviewees to describe their development as an improvising musician, following their timeline from birth till present. This timeline was presented on a large sheet of paper (594 mm × 841 mm), and interviewees were invited to mark time and describe critical activities, incidents, and persons on the way to becoming their present musical personalities. Interviews took about one and a half hour (cf. Sosniak, 2006).

To analyze the data a classification system was developed that included the following themes: skills and activities, knowledge base and other results, environment, self, and development. Within these categories processes of initiative, regulation, and support and feedback cycles could be discerned.

### Results

The musicians passed through four main stages of development: (a) early years (basic musical skills); (b) introduction to jazz improvisation; (c) serious practice/focus on being a professional improvising musician; (d) being a professional (improvising) musician. Throughout these stages, both the elite and semi-elite musical improvisers (increasingly) engaged in intensive deliberate practice, play, and work. The

early years of musical practice and play aimed at the acquisition of basic skills. Members of both groups for instance mentioned incidents that illustrate a remarkable development of aural skills during childhood (e.g., the ease to play music by ear in class). Radio broadcasts, recordings, and (home) concerts were marked as events that incited interest in musical improvisation. Especially the elite referred to such ‘critical incidents’ as trigger to enter jazz education at municipal music schools. All but one of the members of this group started formal jazz education between age 10 and 15. Deliberate practice increased during subsequent years in high school and accumulated after the decision was made to pursue jazz studies at the conservatory. For most semi-elites formal jazz tuition started later. They dedicated themselves to intensive deliberate practice after the decision was made to attend the conservatory.

Deliberate practice, play, and work proliferated from the moment the musicians entered the conservatory. However, findings on learning during conservatory training revealed group differences in intensity and type of individual and group practice. Elites explicitly mentioned the importance of extensive deliberate practice (‘woodshedding’) to create a knowledge base, necessary to play with others. For them ‘playing together’ was regarded a core constituent of learning how to improvise. They emphasized the significance of attending jam sessions, not only to learn group performance skills, but also to learn how to network. Elites adhered to the idea that a strong professional network affords opportunities for learning and work. While improvisational learning activities of the semi-elites mainly focused on learning the prevailing musical idiom (e.g., bebop), the elite musicians expanded ‘idiomatic learning’ towards the development of a personal voice. To pursue this goal, elites even initiated learning activities outside the conservatory curriculum. They continued their quest for a personal sound in the final developmental stage, which can be traced back to the (artistic boundary-crossing) compositional and improvisational activities put forward in the interviews. At all stages and for both groups environmental support for learning and development was high. Especially the elite received abundant support and positive feedback on improvisational expertise development by peers, parents, teachers, colleagues, and the field. This support helped them to persevere in improvisational learning and to scrape a living as a professional musician.

### Conclusions

This study shows that the development of expertise in musical improvisation is a delicate mixture of drive and self-direction, individual and group practice, networking and opportunity seeking, and creation. Based on the activities mentioned by the musicians at all developmental stages it seems that the elites are more ‘innovative’ and the semi-elites are more ‘adaptive’.

Theoretically this study contributes to our knowledge about expertise development in professions that are not regulated by

external rules or legislation, but in which successful performance is defined by audiences, colleagues, and self. Studying improvisational expertise also shows the importance of self-directedness and seeking opportunities for learning. Further research must show whether this is closely linked to interactivity and risk-taking, which are imminent to this style of musical performance.

### **Keywords**

Improvisation, Expertise, Musical development

### **REFERENCES**

- Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R., & Tesch-Römer (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, *100*, 363-406. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.100.3.363
- Sosniak, L. (2006). Retrospective interviews in the study of expertise and expert performance. In K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, P. J. Feltovich, & R. Hoffman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance* (pp.287-301). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wopereis, I. G. J. H., Stoyanov, S., Kirschner, P. A., & Van Merriënboer, J. J. G. (2013). What makes a good musical improviser? An expert view on improvisational expertise. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain*, *23*, 222-235. doi:10.1037/pmu0000021

Wopereis, I., Brand-Gruwel, S., & Boshuizen, E. (2015). The development of improvisational expertise in jazz musicians. In J. Ginsborg, A. Lamont, M. Phillips, & S. Bramley (Eds.). *Proceedings of the Ninth Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music* (ESCOM, pp. 847-848). Manchester, UK: Royal Northern College of Music.