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Metaphors as a Tool in Music Education: The Example of "Storytelling" in Jazz Improvisation

Aims

The usage of metaphors in music education – in order to explain or express aspects in music that are found difficult to verbalize in musical terminology – is a well-known phenomenon. When improvising solos, jazz instrumentalists have no words at their disposal. Still, 'storytelling' is arguably the most common prestige word in descriptions of jazz improvisation. Earlier studies have discussed storytelling in this context from several points of view, e.g., coherence, semantics, linear and temporal development, and performativity (Berliner 1994; Iyer 2004; Monson 1996). This poster presents some results from a PhD project in progress. This study aims to clarify the pertinence of the storytelling metaphor to music education by means of an investigation of the range of meanings ascribed to the term in artistic and educational discourse.

Methods

Explorative qualitative interviews with 15 Swedish jazz improvisers of national and international renown were carried out. Several of the interviewees have also worked extensively as educators in the field of jazz improvisation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, analysed and then also translated from Swedish to English. A condensed representation of the results is presented in the following section.

Results

Several musicians agreed that the concept of storytelling provides an adequate, appropriate image of jazz improvisation. "A good improvisation is about the same thing as a good, captivating story when you sit at a child's bedside at night, who wants you to read or make up a story before she goes

to sleep, you know," says trumpeter Peter Asplund. However, the results show that storytelling can be understood in many ways. The concept seems to function as a metaphor for a combination of several abilities and qualities. Some of these can be categorized under the headlines in the following survey.

Personal and expressive sound

Several informants associate the instrument's sound with the human voice. Bassist Anders Jormin reflects on differences between instruments, some of which may be perceived as closer to the human voice than others: "When I play my improvisations on the double bass, I probably have a human voice, I have melodiousness, dynamics, pauses, that is, the time to reflect after a phrase."

The sound that best promotes storytelling might not be best attained by conventional means. Saxophonist Roland Keijser distinguishes between credibility and technical perfection: "The storyteller sitting on a bench telling his lies, he may mispronounce a few words, or... have some technical deficiencies or something, but he's a damn good storyteller. That's just an extra spice, you know. The timing is there and all the important qualities. There are some jazz saxophonists who think they should improve their playing by taking a number of lessons for a reed teacher at some university, teaching classical playing. And then they acquire a somewhat more neutral technical approach to the instrument. To me that may sound damn weird, I must say. [...] There is no neutral technique. If your dream is to be a good jazz saxophonist, then you should play jazz."

Rich and mature humanity

To come forward as a human being in your improvisation is essential. Trumpeter Ann-Sofi Söderqvist views this as a matter

of "daring to be yourself": "I'm not afraid of big gestures, neither of doing something that is completely bare and naked. [...] It must be true in some way."

The saxophonist Gunnar Lindgren points out that the way a story is told depends on the storyteller. The musical story's authenticity is essential, according to Lindgren. He contrasts real-life stories from a person's own experience with those built on second-hand information: "The difference between the best musicians and the second best is that the second ones tell... 'GP stories' [stories they read in the local newspaper], you know, and the first ones tell their own stories. Even if it is the same story."

Physical openness and wholeness

Singer/violinist Lena Willemark views presence in the moment as intimately connected with the musician's storytelling. In her opinion, such presence is about openness and wholeness: "It has a lot to do with being whole in your body. My body includes my brain, my heart – you know, everything. And if I don't get to know all of me, I won't have the openness. Because then some part of me is closed. [...] When I'm in openness I can feel being a part of the great. [...] The great discovery of being present. [...] That may be what it is to tell a story. And that's how it comes out. That discovery comes out. Yes."

Simplicity

The pianist Lars Jansson points out that good jazz improvisations are often simple: "If you transcribe a good solo, a good soloist, you can be surprised that it is so logical and inside, that it is so simple. [...] But WOW, you just get carried away. [...] Then it is the sound and the presence... and something larger."

Aptitude for creative interplay with fellow musicians and audiences

Some informants point to the importance of pauses in jazz improvisation. The pauses of the improvised solo may provide possibilities for the fellow musicians to listen, react, and respond, thereby facilitating a kind of improvised conversation. Saxophonist Nisse Sandström describes Chet Baker's improvisations:

"He treats himself to pauses. And drummers say it was completely wonderful to play with him. So easy. He leaves something for the others to think about when he solos."

Bassist Anders Jormin says: "I often speak of the outward and the inward gaze. [...] It's the gaze outwards, towards the listeners, towards the fellow musicians – and inwards, to your own inner voice and vision."

Trumpeter Peter Asplund expands on a description of how a jazz group can experience how musical interplay and extra-musical being together form parts of the same continuum: "With my quartet there is a constant dialogue. And then we go on stage and play two full sets, and afterwards we went home to my kitchen and sat there at a round table with some nice cheese and wine, and we continued talking. And then I started to think of it like this: it's really the concert that goes on. We play the same parts, we speak in the same manner, we provide each other with the same space, we make associations, we laugh in the right places, we start talking seriously, sometimes we talk about commonplace stuff that we heard before – that is, an old standard tune – and sometimes we start talking about some new idea that someone brings up and we haven't thought about before – which would be some new tune, you know. [...] The gig went on at night, or rather the supper started on stage."

Rhythmical awareness

Saxophonist Joakim Milder views the rhythmical aspects of the improvisation in relation to the story that is told. If the rhythmical aspects aren't developed accurately, the improviser's storytelling will suffer, in Milder's opinion: "The rhythm is a consequence of that which needed to be said."

Alertness regarding the input and output of musical and non-musical impulses

Joakim Milder also points to the importance of mental preparedness. It is not a question of being equipped with ready solutions to situations that might occur, but of adaptability: "What we must have is the ability to listen to the now and adjust our playing to the demands that are called for

right now and to be able to have that flexibility which to some extent is motorically and physically conditioned. [...] To me it's really completely a mental preparedness."

In Ann-Sofi Söderqvist's opinion, thoughts and plans are worthless in the performance situation, since everything is about "here and now."

Conclusions

The results clarify a number of ways in which the metaphor "storytelling" might function as a tool for education in jazz improvisation. On a general level, the ways artists and educators employ the concept "storytelling" in discourse on jazz improvisation exemplifies the importance of metaphor in music education. This study shows how metaphor functions as an indispensable but insufficiently investigated educational tool in order to verbalize and mediate holistic views of sets of musical phenomena.

Future directions

The study of the function of metaphor in artistic and educational contexts will be expanded through (i) further interviews with practitioners in the field of spoken theatre regarding their use of the concept "musicality" (Bjerstedt 2010), and (ii) analyses of intermedial conceptual loans in the light of theories of metaphor and conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Zbikowski 2002).

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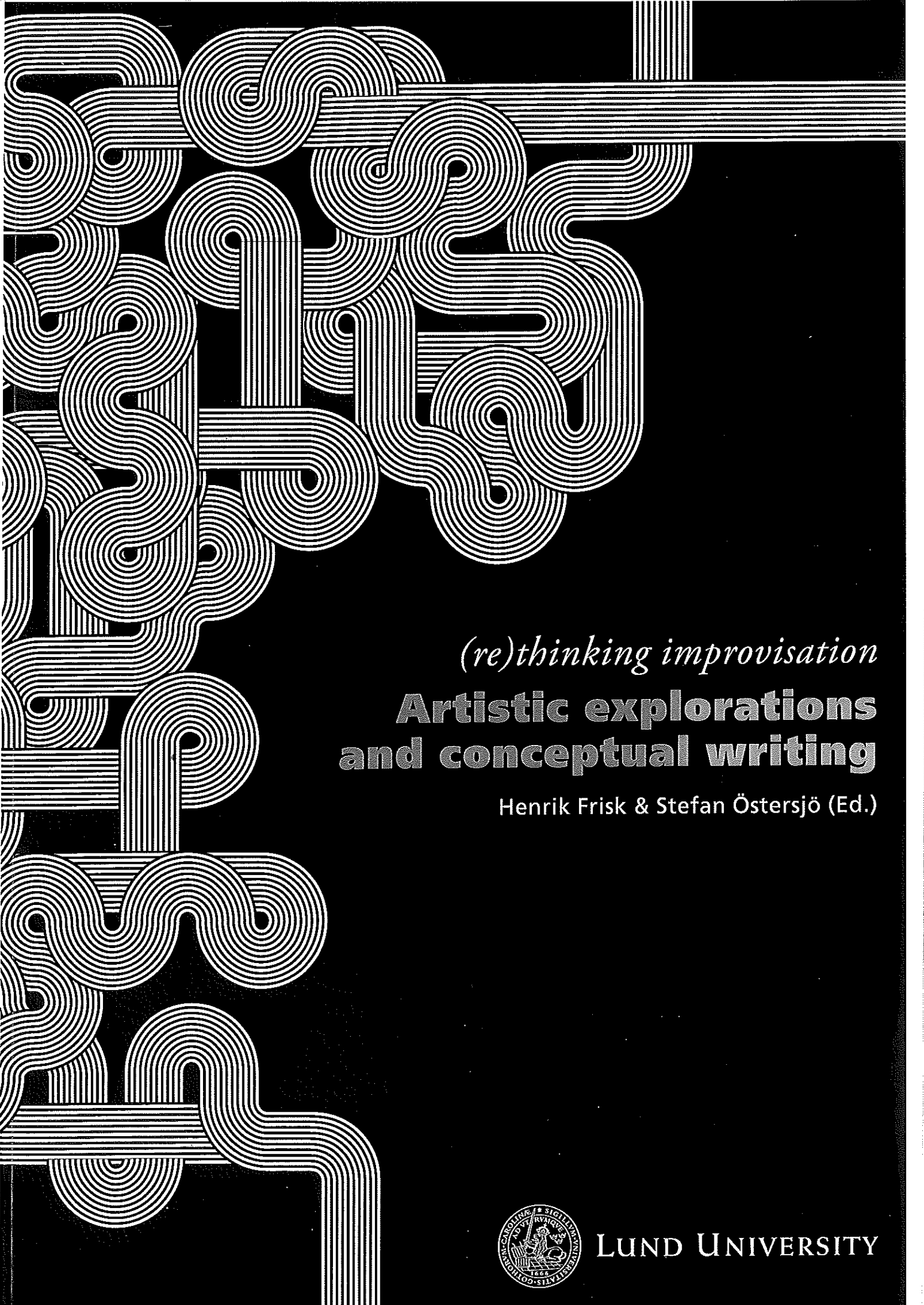
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