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# **Conducted Improvisation**

**A study of the effect of the concept of signs on musical creativity**

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# Abstract

The purpose of this thesis *Conducted Improvisation* is to study how a musical sign language can effect creativity, musical interaction and sense of freedom in ensemble playing by analyzing *Extemporize*, a sign system I have developed, with the further goal to explore the pedagogical potential in this practice. The research questions that drive this study are: In what ways does the sign system effect creativity and playfulness in improvised performance? In what ways does the sign system affect the sense of freedom in ensemble performance? In what ways does the sign system effect musical interaction?

The material for the survey has been acquired through video documentation of rehearsals and concerts and interviews with the participants. 15 musicians took part in this study whereof 10 of them were interviewed. The results of the study indicate that sign language is effective in working with improvisation in ensemble and can have an impact on both freedom and constraint, it has the possibility to strengthen the voice of the musicians and push them in other musical directions than normally. But conducted improvisation can also create frustrations in the musicians, especially if the sign system is not rehearsed enough.

Keywords: Conducted improvisation, sign system, musical performance, ensemble teaching, artistic research.

# Sammenfatning

Formålet med denne afhandling *Conducted Improvisation* er at undersøge, hvordan et musikalsk tegnsprog kan påvirke kreativitet, musikalsk interaktion og følelse af frihed i sammenspilssituationer ved at analysere *Extemporize*, et tegnsprog jeg har udarbejdet, med yderligere det formål at udforske det pædagogiske potentiale i denne praksis. Forskningsspørgsmålene, der driver denne undersøgelse er: På hvilke måder påvirker tegnsproget kreativitet og leg i improvisation? På hvilke måder påvirker tegnsproget følelsen af frihed i sammenspilssituationer? Hvilken effekt har tegnsproget på musikalsk interaktion? Materialet til undersøgelsen er erhvervet gennem video dokumentation af øvere og koncerter og interviews med deltagerne. 15 musikere deltog i denne undersøgelse, hvoraf 10 af dem blev interviewet. Resultaterne af undersøgelsen viser, at tegnsproget er effektivt i arbejdet med improvisation i ensemble og kan have en indvirkning på både frihed og tvang, det har mulighed for at styrke musikernes stemmer og skubbe dem i andre musikalske retninger end normalt. Men dirigeret improvisation kan også skabe frustrationer i musikerne, især hvis tegnsproget ikke er øvet nok.

Nøgleord: Dirigeret improvisation, tegnsprog, musikalsk ydeevne, ensemble undervisning, kunstnerisk forskning.

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# Introduction

My name is Nana Pi Aabo Larsen and I'm a Danish tenor saxophone player, taking a master in education at the jazz department, at the Malmö Academy of Music. I work with structured improvisation by way of conducted performance, using a sign system I have created. During my education, I have been mostly focussing on teaching improvisation in ensembles, working with the students' creativity and expression, driven by a deep wish to achieve a more heartfelt playing.

My first encounter with conducted improvisation was through the Danish saxophone player Lotte Anker in my third year (2012/13) at the Malmö Academy of Music. She was my teacher in ensemble playing and we worked with structured improvisation through her sign system. I immediately felt more expressive on my horn when working with her instructions and the interaction with the other musicians in the ensemble seemed more in the moment and alive. I found that the music became more sound-based and intuitive, as if we got down to a deeper level of focus. My meeting with Lotte Anker's sign system made me curious in developing my own sign system. Her influence can be seen in the signs I developed.

I have named my sign system *Extemporize*, because it means to compose, perform or produce music without preparation. To extemporize is to improvise, "play it by ear" and "think on one's feet", which is the work situation for the musicians I'm conducting. *Extemporize* consists of several familiar "musical" parameters such as register, interval, dynamics, groove, tempo, space, pattern, melody/line, but there are also more abstract signs that address more specific musical behaviours<sup>1</sup>. I use *Extemporize* as a teaching method, as well as an artistic tool, where I work as a conductor creating music with fellow musicians. I've chosen to name this platform *Extemporary 9* for the same reasons I call the sign system *Extemporize*. *Extemporary 9* will be the benchmark for this study in describing my signs, as well as in my research on how my signs are interpreted, by filming *Extemporary 9* in action during rehearsals and concerts. The platform consists of a core group of musicians and a number of ad hoc players. 15 musicians have participated in *Extemporary 9* during this study, in which some have been selected specifically and some more by chance<sup>2</sup>. The sound I want to explore

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<sup>1</sup> I describe the signs and their function in *Describing the function of my signs*.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed explanation in *The design of the study*.

with *Extemporary 9* is to create dark improvised pop, so when working with *Extemporary 9* I also use "text cards" for the singer, where I have written some simple lyrics on, that he/she can use, when the text-sign is given. The chosen card will name the improvisation we are making. The singer can also choose not to pick a card and improvise lyrics by him/herself when the text-sign is given.

What fascinates me the most with conducted improvisation is that the sign system becomes a communication tool in which I can influence the players' paths while they are playing, without having to stop the music and talk to them. My finest goal is, whether I'm conducting or teaching, to create an environment where the musicians feel free to explore and experience their instrument and develop their musical skills, while connecting with each other's impulses, in the moment. I hope that this thesis will give further insight on and an understanding of how the sign system affects the musicians' creativity and playfulness, and if my signs give the musicians a sense of freedom or constraint.

In my study I will also present other well-established sign languages, like *Soundpainting* and *Conduction*.

# Purpose

My aim in this study is to describe the signs I have developed and study how they function in ensemble playing, with the further goal to explore the pedagogical potential in this practice.

The research questions that drive the study are:

- In what ways does conducted improvisation effect creativity and playfulness in improvised performance?
- In what ways does the sign system affect the sense of freedom in ensemble performance?
- In what ways does the sign system effect musical interaction?

# Theory

In this section I will first start by outlining the sign systems developed by Lawrence Douglas "Butch" Morris and Walter Thompson and how their practices of conducted improvisation have influenced the field. Then I will present the vocabulary and function of their sign systems as well as presenting the sign systems of John Zorn and Lotte Anker. Finally I will elucidate the difference between interpretation and improvisation.

## Conducted improvisation

Walter Thompson and Butch Morris have made a profound impact on the use of sign language in music as we know it today. Both have developed their own unique sign systems, which many musicians all over the world have adapted, learnt or been inspired by, to use for instant composing and improvisation to form real-time compositions.

### Butch Morris

Butch Morris called his sign system *Conduction*. Morris made his first *Conduction* on the 1st of February, 1985 at The Kitchen in New York. The Piece was called *Current Trends in Racism in Modern America* and musicians like John Zorn and Frank Lowe participated in the performance. Before Morris died, on the 29th of January 2013 at the age of 65, he had performed more than 200 *Conductions* and worked with more than 5000 people all over the world. Morris often collaborated with a mix of writers, dancers, visual artists, classical, jazz, pop, funk musicians and non-improvisors. In 1976 he went on tour in Europe and ended up settling down in France. It was in this period, while teaching in Belgium and Holland, that he started developing the signs of *Conduction* and within this context he had the opportunity to explore and develop his method in ensembles. During his career he held many workshops on *Conduction* all over the world. Although many of his signs were his own, some of them were adapted from Horace Tapscott, Charles Moffett, Sun Ra, Lukas Foss and also from Leonard Bernstein's direction of "Four Improvisations by the Orchestra" (Ratliff, 2013). In particular, the drummer Charles Moffett had a big impact on Butch Morris and his work. In his own words, "my conducting teacher told me what couldn't be done [to composed music]. Charles Moffett taught me what could be done [despite traditions to the contrary]" (Morris 2014, n.p.)

Even though there were people that inspired him in the direction of creating his own sign system, he also met opposition:

He introduced this concept in 1985 and at first met resistance from musicians who were not willing to learn the vocabulary and respond to the signals<sup>3</sup>; he was often in a position of asking artists to reorient themselves to his imagination and make something new out of familiar materials. But he demanded to be taken seriously, and he was. (Ratliff, 2013, n.p.)

Morris preferred to work with musicians for five days before performing with them on stage. “Many different kinds of performers could take part, as long as they had learned his method. (Five days of rehearsal was his preference)” (Ratliff, 2013, n.p.). In 1995 Morris conducted *Holy Sea*, a symphonic work with the *Orchestra della Toscana* in Italy, but for months he refused to conduct the orchestra because he was told that he only could get “three days, three hours a day, to instruct the orchestra” (Chideya, F, 2008b). This time frame he found too short because, “for me to teach this way of working in nine hours, I thought, was going to be a little too stressful, so I refused” (ibid). Morris ended up taking the job in the end, even though he rarely accepted jobs with a short timeline. *Holy Sea* was recorded and *Gramophone*, *Stereo Review* and *Down Beat* all gave it five stars, “which is the best you can get in a review in any of those magazines.... and it's quite a piece of music.... So you know, I was very happy in the end, but I had to take a two-week vacation” (Chideya, F, 2008b, n.p.).

## **Conduction**

The word conduction stands for the transfer of energy and in Butch Morris’s own words, “A *Conduction* is a conducted improvisation. In essence it is an improvised duet for ensemble and conductor, a “Prose Communion - a melding of minds”” (Morris, 2014, n.p.). The melding of minds seems to be the theory on which his sign system is based, to make the communication between the conductor and ensemble as one thought or a unity of thoughts.

As a conductor/composer I have developed a vocabulary of gestural information to extend the language of both musician and conductor to further facilitate composition as a flexible, functional, mutual corresponding tool. In doing so the bonds of both

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<sup>3</sup> Sign and signal are used as synonymous in this thesis.

composition and conducting become limitless, and the balance between composer, conductor, improviser becomes equal. (Morris, 2014, n.p.)

Morris was seeking for the improviser's first thought, their direct impulse, by taking them through different stages of sound, diving into their imagination; and it seems like he found an equal balance between conductor and improviser in mastering his sign system *Conduction*.

Of course, I can conduct certain things in their traditional way, but that wasn't my need. My need was to really understand how to take notation and expand it for improvisers, and non-improvisers for that matter. For interpreters to understand a broader scope of music and to reach a new state of poise, so to speak. I have signs that mean sustain, repeat, graphic information, melodic information, but each musician is at liberty to translate and to express the vocabulary. (Chideya, F, 2008b, n.p.)

Letting the musicians interpret his signs in their own way and working in many different genres like classical, pop and jazz, to mention a few, made his work very versatile; and for Morris it didn't matter what genre he was working in because he always used the same signs but got different outcomes via the interpretation of the musicians. (Chideya, F, 2008b, n.p.)

### **Walter Thompson**

In 1974, Walter Thompson moved to Woodstock, and it was here that his curiosity for working with sign language in music started, under a strong influence from his teacher Anthony Braxton, an avant-garde alto saxophone player who worked with structured improvisation. Walter Thompson's sign system is called *Soundpainting* and has "...become a universal composing language for composers and artists of all disciplines and abilities" (Thompson 2014, n.p.). The language of *Soundpainting* is being used in education in more than 35 countries and Walter Thompson has a long list of names on his website of people that he or Francois Jeanneau have certified in using *Soundpainting*. You can get a certification on two levels:

Each candidate is required to fully comprehend the theoretical, physical and compositional aspects of the first 43 gestures from workbook 1 (Level 1) and the 75 gestures from Workbook 2 (Level 2). An aural test based on the theoretical parameters as well as a test of composing skills, utilizing a Soundpainting orchestra, are required

in attaining Certification. (Thompson 2014, n.p.)

Four people who embrace both levels of *Soundpainting* are Ketil Duckert, Gustav Rasmussen, Bruno Faria and Hada Benedito. Ketil Duckert and Gustav Rasmussen have published a book *Sammenspil og improvisation med Soundpainting* in Denmark that explains the language of *Soundpainting* to music teachers in order to give them a communication tool they can use in ensemble teaching.

As music educators, we are used to communicate verbally about the music after it is finished - with Soundpainting we can communicate while we play, and we believe that it is providing other ways to develop the students. The book's fulcrum is the musical sign language Soundpainting and how we can use it as a method of ensemble teaching. (Duckert & Rasmussen 2013, n.p.)

The book has been well received among educators in Denmark. Lars Brinck, who is a professor of Music Education and Learning at the Conservatory in Copenhagen, supports the publication in the following way: "Soundpainting shows with its clear framework for creative expression new avenues for the development of ensemble skills for musicians of all ages and at all levels" (Thompson 2014, n.p.). This is what Thompson has to say about Duckert's and Rasmussen's work:

I first met Ketil Duckert and Gustav Rasmussen during the summer of 2004 in Germany at an IASJ conference and had the occasion to introduce them to Soundpainting. They have since become important figures in the development and growth of Soundpainting. They are regular members of the Soundpainting Think Tank – an annual conference whose aim is to further develop Soundpainting in all areas. I have only the highest praise for their ability both as educators and performers in the use of Soundpainting and am very honored that they have written this wonderful book. (Thompson 2014, n.p.)

Bruno Coimbra Faria is researching on experiences of musical indeterminacy found in *Soundpainting* from the perspective of working with classically trained flute students at Malmö Academy of Music. In a paper presented at *Performa*, he writes that "*Soundpainting* carries in its structures a dialogical character in which musical knowledge and sensitive listening to the other are key elements for a full exploration of the potentialities raised

through the constantly unfolding musical exchanges within this medium” (Faria, 2013, p. 2). His study shows that the structures of *Soundpainting* can help a classical musician not to feel uncomfortable when asked to improvise, because the signs give the musicians a smaller vocabulary to interpret, combined with “the situation of collective effort in which the members of an ensemble share a similar moment of search and recognition within an improvisatory practice” (ibid, p. 5). He also found that the signs, which are more open to interpretation, can create “situations of... ‘not knowing what to say’ with one’s instrument” (ibid, p. 6). But Faria also found that:

A gradual work exploring initially more delimiting signs, focusing on single parameters, and then moving to others that establish smaller rates of development of ideas, as well as combinations of signs that restrict the amount of material to be used in certain situations has been perceived as efficient in terms of confidence building through slow exploration of already established knowledge. After reaching a stage of higher acquaintance and fluidity within the lines of comfort zones and taking risks, exploring more fully one’s knowledge within the possibilities and openings of the signs. (Faria, 2013, p. 6)

To work with strengthening the classical musicians vocabulary they become familiar with their improvisational voice, which he refers to as being *ready-to-hand*, a terminology he takes from Heidegger that “resembles the idea of pre-reflective action” (ibid, p. 4). By disturbing their pre-reflective actions the “*un-ready-to-hand*” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 4) “through unexpected deficiencies in the equipments used.... that requires a musician to define and organize the musical materials in the moment of performance.... that challenges the usual paradigm of classically trained musicians both artistically and pedagogically” (Faria, 2013, p. 4). His study shows that *Soundpainting* can change a musician’s self-image of not being able to improvise because:

The parameters established in each sign isolate specific musical aspects in ways that allow the musician to explore previous knowledge creatively within frameworks that are not overwhelmingly complex. As some of the participants of the pre-study realized have formulated, the burden of fearing failure when attempting to improvise is smoothed out by how musical elements are broken down through the signs into smaller structures that are compatible with one’s interpretative practices and, at the same time manageable within the situation of exploring previous knowledge in a new and

challenging improvisatory musical context. (Faria, 2013, p. 5)

Faira found that *Soundpainting* has the potential to “spin one’s hermeneutical movement forward within an improvisatory practice and complement the knowledge of the classically trained musician” (ibid, p. 7) and be “helpful to us to rid ourselves of the habit of always hearing what we already understand” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 7) But the level of improvisational developments were dependent on the musician’s ability to be open to listen.

I had the pleasure of meeting Hada Benedito in Berlin in 2014, where I attended a two-day workshop she held teaching the language of *Soundpainting*. We were given a paper with around 60 gestures and I learnt 48 during the workshop. We tried using the signs conducting the other participants, which was really hard for me because I had the impulse to use my own signs when conducting. We ended the workshop with a concert at Sowieso, where the participants played together with her ensemble *Berlin Soundpainting Orchestra*. Attending the workshop has given me some insight and understanding of the basic signs of *Soundpainting*. But the 48 gestures I have learnt are only a small percentage of the many gestures the language holds. “Presently (2015) the language comprises more than 1200 gestures that are signed by the Soundpainter (composer) to indicate the type of material desired by the performers” (Thompson 2014, n.p.). The sign system is constantly evolving, “the language continues to be developed through Thompson’s performances, international think tanks, and the contributions of a wide range of artists and educators” (Thompson 2014, n.p.). The “Think Tanks” are an annual conference that Walter Thompson organizes as a discussion forum with artists who work with the sign system, to question and develop the different signs of the *Soundpainting* language.

### **Soundpainting**

The signs of *Soundpainting* use the syntax of *what*, *how*, *who* and *when*. All of the signs are grouped in two categories, *sculpting gestures* indicate *what* type of material and how it is to be performed and *function signals* indicate *who* performs and *when* to begin performing. But the *how* gestures are rarely used by the conductor:

The Soundpainter often signs a phrase leaving out a How gesture. For example: Whole Group, Long Tone, Play. If you sign your phrase without a How gesture, then it is the

performers choice in deciding the dynamics and quality of the material. (Thompson 2014, n.p.)

The two categories are broken down into six sub categories: *Sculpting gestures* have four subcategories: *Content gestures*, *Modifiers*, *Modes* and *Palettes*. *Function signals* have two subcategories; *Identifiers* and *Go gestures*:

- *Content gestures* identify *what* type of material is to be performed, such as “improvise”, “minimalism”, “long tones”, “play”, “can’t play”, “pointillism” etc.
- *Modifiers* are *how* gestures, such as “change”, “pitch up/down”, “volume fader”, “tempo fader”, “time” and “space”.
- *Modes* are *Content gestures*, embodying specific performance parameters like “scanning”, “point to point”, “hit” and “launch mode”.
- *Palettes* are primarily *Content gestures*, identifying composed and/or rehearsed material. Some of the signs indicates specific material to be performed, others specific styles, disciplines, improvisation, genres etc.
- *Identifiers* are the *who* gestures, such as “whole group”, “rest of the group”, “you”, “group 1”, “woodwinds”, “brass”, “singers”, “musicians”, “dancers”, “visual arts” etc.
- *Go gestures* indicate *when* to enter or exit the composition, like “play”, “stop”, “enter/exit slowly”, “fade in/out”, “finish your idea” and “wait”.

Some of the *Content gestures* such as “point to point”, “scanning”, “play”, “can’t play”, “relate to” and “improvise” also have three rates of development. Rate one tells the performer to develop the material in such a way that one minute later there would still be a relationship to their original idea. Rate two tells the performer to develop the material about twice as fast as that of rate one, so a minute later there would only be a vague relationship to the original idea. Rate three tells the performer that they can develop the material at any rate of their choosing.

The conductor has four *Imaginary Regions* when signing gestures, of which I will mention two of these gestures. *The Neutral Position* is where the conductor shows the different gestures to the participants, and when the conductor goes into *The Box* the gestures becomes

action. The conductor can also show motions in *The Box* that the musicians imitate spontaneously.

### **John Zorn**

John Zorn is an avant-garde saxophone player and composer from New York, who has developed experimental methods for conducted improvisation as one out of several approaches to composition:

Composing is more than just imagining music - it's knowing how to communicate it to musicians. And you don't give an improviser music that's completely written out, or ask a classical musician to improvise. I'm interested in speaking to musicians in their own languages, on their own terms, and in bringing out the best in what they do. To challenge them and excite them. (Zorn 2013, n.p.)

This statement describes his work with composing music well, as one of the creators behind *Game Pieces*, which are inspired by sport or war games. The pieces can involve hand gestures and flash cards and the players have certain rules to follow, while there can also be pre-arranged sequences that the players can choose to play accordingly by following the rules; so there is a lot of interaction and communication concerning both improvisation and composition among the players involved. All his *Game Pieces* have different settings and not all compositions contain all the elements written above. *Cobra* is one of his most well known *Game Pieces* which is inspired by a war game from "the *Avalon Hill* game company, which created strategic simulation games involving arcane sets of rules, dice rolls, etc., in an effort to approximate, for example, war planning and theory" (Olewnick 1991, n.p.). The composition consists of cues notated on cards and an advanced but flexible system of rules, which corresponds to the cards given through the piece:

Zorn would hold up cards with symbols, usually choosing certain small combinations of players. These symbols could instruct, among many other things, that the musicians improvise in a certain style (surf guitar, free noise, punk, etc.) and/or could delimit the duration, volume, and so on. He would thus spontaneously organize a composition that, for all its apparent anarchy, was actually following a relatively strict set of assumptions. The kicker was that the players could counteract his commands, forming ad hoc blocs, cooperate or betray said blocs, form alliances "against" other players, etc.

As an audience member, one saw a wonderful display of real-time politics combined with art creation, and the result was often spectacular. (Olewnick 1991, n.p.)

Zorn was interested in creating changing blocks of sound by making the musicians work in groups without limiting their imagination or telling them what to do, when to play or with whom to play with, the cards only gave the musicians a variety of options to get inspired by. The musicians showed when they wanted to interact by using gestures to the group and conductor, creating a small society where every musician found their own position, by using the power given or not (Zorn 1992, n.p.).

The people on the stage are exposing themselves more nakedly than they ever have before, more nakedly than when they are just playing music. Because they are having a little carrot dangled in front of them and it is interesting to see who tries to grab the carrot and who doesn't. And a lot of the times the people who try to grab the carrot, it is pulled out of their hands by someone else in the band. So it becomes kind of a scary frightening thing to be in front of that band, to see these people kind of blossom and become the assholes that they really are (laughing). (Zorn 1992, n.p.)

*Cobra* has been performed many times by many different musicians since the first time the piece was played in 1984. But very much like working with a sign system, you can never foresee how the piece will develop, even though you as a conductor might use the same idea twice, the interpretation of the signs will always create new paths, creating new impulses in the dialogue unfolding as an instant composition.

### **Lotte Anker**

Lotte Anker is an avant-garde saxophone player and composer from Copenhagen, who works in the improvised and contemporary new music scene. She collaborates with musicians like Gerald Cleaver, Craig Taborn, Marilyn Mazur, Tim Berne, Paal Nilssen-Love, Marylin Crispell and Herb Robertson. She has been a big influence on me, in terms of finding my understanding of music as an improviser and composer. When she introduced me to her signs it was like something clicked. My instrument and musical voice felt connected in a completely other way than what I had experienced before, when improvising. I used to have ongoing thoughts - nearly always negative thoughts - about my own playing, while playing. But when Lotte conducted us, my focus changed from being inwards to outwards, because I

was aware of her instructions instead of myself and this made me stand on neutral ground when playing.

Below is a list of signs, which she taught the ensemble:

- *Small machines*, which is a short repeated pattern.
- *Follow the leader*, play like the player you are drawn to.
- *Do not follow*, play the opposite of what the player you are drawn to does.
- *Solo*.
- *Duo or trio*.
- *Toys*, play with prepared instruments.
- *Resistance*, play as if somebody/something prevents you from playing.
- *Conducted phrases*, follow the conductor's motions.
- *Hits conducted*, follow the conductor's actions.
- *Repeat same note*, follow the conductor's actions.
- *Fast as possible*.
- *Backwards notes*, imitate the sound reverse.
- *Broken instrument*, deconstructing instrument.

## **Interpretation or improvisation**

When Morris began working with instant composing, his interest was sparked by a curiosity about the gap between notated and improvised music, because he “realized that there was a great divide between what is notated and what is improvised,” and he “wanted to discover or wanted to understand what that divide was” (Chideya, F, 2008b, n.p.). He wanted to “figure out how to make notation more flexible for a larger ensemble.... to hear 25 people play like a jazz trio.... to have that kind of combustion and spontaneity and momentum and ignition”. This was the reason he “started thinking about conducting.” Morris found that “*Conduction* opens up the possibilities of music” and “he thinks it is the best way to play music.” (ibid, n.p.) He says:

I do conduction, and it doesn't matter whether I do it with classical musicians or jazz musicians or traditional Japanese instruments, Korean instruments, Turkish instruments. It doesn't matter. This is what I do, work with funk musicians or pop

musicians. It doesn't matter. I'm still doing - I'm still showing everybody the same sign. (Chideya, F, 2008b, n.p.).

The composer Sandeep Bhagwati discusses how musicians relate to symbolic representations in music making and proposes that the history of each musician makes the response unique:

The technique of music making is inscribed into the musician's body through the ceaseless iterations of daily practice and performance, that a musician's body is the sum and phenotext of the musician's musical trajectory. In much the same way, the aesthetical affiliations we form both as musicians and as thinking and feeling human beings are the components and genotext of all our improvisations. (Bhagwati, 2013, p. 99)

Sandeep Bhagwati further states that, "when we improvise, we do not make music that is free of rules and regulations – when we improvise we make music according to rules and regulations" (Bhagwati, 2013, p. 99). But these rules might be "*imperceptible to ourselves*: rules we have learnt – and forgotten... or have never understood... or have deliberately chosen to ignore" (ibid p. 99). So when a musician improvises s/he projects or interprets the surroundings and themselves and their knowledge simultaneously on a consciously or unconsciously level. So improvisation and interpretation do not come separately but together. Bhagwati also concludes that total freedom in improvised performance is not a possibility:

There is no such thing as free improvisation much in the same way as there is no such thing as entirely free love. Music, especially improvised music, is a quintessentially polythetic art i.e. it cannot be understood in any convenient, conceptual overview – it must be performed one event, one moment at the time. (Bhagwati, 2013, p. 99)

The book *Rethinking Improvisation*, edited by Stefan Östersjö and Henrik Frisk, is a study of interaction, attentive listening and musical freedom in improvised musical performance. They found that, "our understanding of the concept of musical freedom points more to the function of constraints and conventions than towards any magical entity of artistic freedom or divine inspiration distinct from non-improvised musical forms and traditions" (Östersjö & Frisk, 2013, p. 7). Denley's thoughts about the matter support this statement:

For the improviser, the physicality of producing sound (the hardware) is not a separate

activity from thought, emotions and ideas in music (the software). In the act of creation, there is a constant loop between the hierarchy of factors involved in the process. My lungs, lips, fingers, voice box and their working together with the potentials of sound are dialoguing with other levels, which I might call mind and perception. The thoughts and decisions are sustained and modified by my physical potentials and visa versa, but as soon as I try to define these separately I run into problems. (Denley, 1991, p. 116)

Östersjö and Frisk discuss the relation between conducted improvisation and score-based composition and argue that the “difference between a sign inscribed as visual gesture in space and as written text is questioned, while a different question also emerges that has to do with work identity and individual agency.” (Östersjö & Frisk, 2013, p. 9). They continue by stating that, ”while the signs refer to quite specific musical materials, the identity of the performers and the individual freedom expressed in the moment of performance may constitute the agency that defines the identity of the work.” (ibid, p. 9) Thompson discusses this phenomenon along similar lines but instead suggesting a dynamic between the elements of specificity and chance:

The Soundpainter composes in real time utilizing the gestures to create the composition in any way they desire. The Soundpainter sometimes knows what he/she will receive from the performers and sometimes does not know what he/she will receive – the elements of specificity and chance. The Soundpainter composes with what happens in the moment, whether expected or not. The ability to compose with what happens in the moment, in real time, is what is required in order to attain a high level of fluency with the Soundpainting language. (Thompson 2014, n.p.)

If we understand the nature of conducted improvisation as that of an instant composition, the improvisatory elements are and must remain central, and the relative freedom of the performers should be a primary aim, yet still, any conducted improvisation is characterised by imposing a number of constraints on the performers. However, the more important question remains: What does freedom in musical improvisation really amount to?

# Method

First, I will start by describing the use of qualitative research as a method. Second, I will explain how I have conducted the qualitative interviews and how observation was used in this study. This is followed by an outline of the design of the study. Finally I will elaborate on the analysis and ethics of qualitative research and my implementation of these in this study.

## Qualitative research as a method

The qualitative research method of ethnography is often used when researching performing art because it allows the researcher to access and address both the individual and group creativity as an active participant:

In approaching the individual and group creativity, expression and experience that lies at the heart of the performing arts, ethnography is a particularly suitable tool, allowing us both to study and reach our own understandings while gathering those of the people involved and situating them within their broader social and cultural contexts. (Krüger, 2008, p. 1)

Qualitative research makes it possible to generate "knowledge from people's shared understanding and negotiations within a historical and social context. The researcher is involved and subjective, that is, informed by his/her personal experience in interaction with the people studied" (ibid p. 13). The researcher gets an inside understanding of the group:

In Ethnography, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection, using methods of cultural participant-observation and open-ended interviewing, while becoming a cultural insider among the people studied. The ethnography process typically includes the collection of text-based data including fieldnotes, transcribed audio and video recordings and images during fieldwork, which is an active, interpretative and subjective method that distinguishes ethnography from other approaches, specifically quantitative methods. (ibid p. 18-19)

Since qualitative research methods are subjective, the why and how is essential and the what, where and when are not so important, which is why "qualitative research is also called soft sciences, because it is build on interpretative knowledge from subjects, which are accepted or

rejected on how well the case is argued” (ibid p. 17). Which is also why:

The aim of qualitative research is not to discover reality, for by phenomenological reasoning this is impossible. The aim is to construct a clearer experimental memory and to help people obtain a more sophisticated account of things. Sophistication is partly a matter of withstanding disciplined scepticism. Science strives to build universal understanding. The understanding reached by each individual will of course be to some degree unique to the beholder, but much will be held in common. (Bresler & Stake, 1991 p. 76)

Ethnographic research may be divided in two categories: applied and non-applied. Applied research, which is what is used in this study, is “concerned with using the understandings gained during ethnographic research in order to solve problems or bring about positive change.” (Krüger, 2008, p. 18) Applied research is used:

... in institutions, communities or groups and mostly found fields like education, health and other practice-based disciplines that seek to improve the lives of the people studied. It is problem-oriented research that is designed to bring about a desired change, the direction of which is guided by the research results. (ibid p. 18)

By using applied ethnographic research I can improve and reshape my practice based on the results of the study.

## **Qualitative Interview**

I carried out the interviews over e-mail, since the participants and I were in different countries at the time when the material was to be collected. The format of the interviews was a questionnaire, which in turn referred to a number of video clips that the musicians could access on YouTube. These videos had first been analyzed by me, using a qualitative method. In addition to my own analysis of the video material, I have conducted interviews with the participating musicians using the selected video-recordings, “to gain feedback for further analysis” (Krüger, 2008, p. 92). I have chosen to interview 10 out of the 15 musicians who participated in *Extemporary 9* during this study. Krüger also states that this “is a type of research in which the researcher relies on and seeks to understand the views of a limited number of participants (ibid p. 14). The analysis of the interviews, constitute the main results

of the project.

## Observation as a method

I have been a participant-observer through performance ethnography by being an active participant, conducting the musicians in rehearsals and concert performances. Participant-observation is “of significant value as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics and physical boundaries, and to gain cultural experiences from the ‘inside’” (Krüger, 2008, p. 74). In the term participant-observation lies participation and observation, I as a researcher am “... present in and interacts with the people when an activity or event is occurring” (ibid p. 74). An observation is what I as a researcher see and “it is important to acknowledge that your observations are always filtered through interpretive frames, and are never objective and neutral” (ibid p. 74). I as a researcher of this study involve participation in actual performance. Being the conductor of the ensemble can give “aspects directly or indirectly related to a creative work, and can precipitate a sense of the style and aesthetics of a piece of music” (ibid p. 75/76). All the stages of the work have been recorded on video and every rehearsal and concert has been filmed from the dual perspectives of the conductor and the band, to capture “a mental picture of an event or situation so as to place critical incidents into context at a later stage” (ibid p. 92). The videos have therefore been edited together so that the interactions “of behavioural data that includes nonverbal and verbal communication” (ibid p. 93) between the musicians and conductor can be observed<sup>4</sup>.

## Design of the study

I started rehearsing *Extemporize* with the core group of *Extemporary 9* in January 2014 in Malmö, teaching them the sign system and working on making pieces together, in the process also adjusting some signs for better interpretation, from the feedback of the participants. All with the aim to be ready to play two concerts in February 2014 (the 10th of February at Vibe, a Festival in Malmö and a week later at PH Cafeen during the Winter Jazz Festival in Copenhagen), with the intention from the beginning to have Mads Hyhne and Kristian Tangvik as part of *Extemporary 9*. Mads was able to attend both concerts and Kristian made it to the concert in Copenhagen. We then played two concerts during Copenhagen Jazz

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex 1 for links to the videos.

Festival in July 2014, (the 8th of July at Huset and the 11th of July at Mellelrummet), where most of the core group attended, plus some additional musicians creating an expanded version of *Extemporary 9*. The motivation to create an expanded group came out of a curiosity of what sound we could produce by doubling up all horn players. But the decision of doing it came rather spontaneously in June 2014, and therefore some of the ad hoc musicians were selected on impulse and (almost) by chance, based on recommendations from the other musicians I had picked out. The ad hoc musicians learned the sign system by an introduction video I made for the occasion, so the first time all musicians met was the 8th of July. Most of them were playing other concerts at the Festival at different times during the day and therefore they arrived at different times. I myself was playing a concert before, on the same stage as *Extemporary 9*, with *Nezelhorns In An Elephant Strin*, (another group together with Petter and Daniel). For this reason I arranged a run-through earlier during the day, which not all musicians were able to attend, and then we used the soundcheck time for both groups only to work on *Extemporary 9*. But even this soundcheck not all musicians were able to attend, so due to many factors it was not the most connected gathering.

I then started to look at the material by coding the videos, which resulted in the selection of the material analyzed in this study, and was then followed by creating questionnaires<sup>5</sup> for the 10 participants I chose to interview. When receiving all the answers from the interview participants I began coding their answers, culminating in 7 themes described in the results chapter. The main codes were *The participants experience with other sign systems*, *Unaware of conductor*, *Different impressions of the sign system*, *Opinions on communication and listening*, *More time for rehearsals*, *Conductor or improviser* and *Expanding the musicians' vocabulary*, which resulted in 3 themes discussed in the discussion chapter *Freedom or constraint*, *Interaction* and *"Extemporize" as a pedagogical tool*.

## Qualitative Analysis

I have used qualitative coding in the analysis of the videos and the interviews with the participants, looking for “‘meaning units’ in the data” (Krüger, 2008, p. 111). In the videos I have looked for positive and negative moments in communication in the music, looking at the verbal and non-verbal interaction between musicians and conductor. When analyzing the

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<sup>5</sup> See Annex 2 to view the questionnaire.

replies from the participants I have looked for “units (snippets of text) that stand out because they occur often, are crucial to other units, or are rare and influential” (ibid p. 111), through an inductive approach from which I found seven themes connecting to the purpose of the study.

Qualitative analysis is organized more around the notes and stories the researcher keeps, increasingly focused on a small number of issues or themes. The researcher select the most revealing instances, identifies vignettes and composes narratives from day to day, then uses an even smaller selection of them in the final presentation (Goetz & LeCompte, 1991, p. 85)

After selecting quotes to the seven themes in the results chapter, I compiled three themes in order to analyze their quotes in the discussion chapter.

## **Ethics**

I have received everyone's consent to participate, for using their real names in the paper and to put the videos used in the study on youtube. All of the participants have seen the finished result of my thesis before I submitted the paper to examination, giving them the opportunity to comment and change matters they may have been uncomfortable with.

It has been of utmost importance to me that the musicians participating in the study have felt good about their participation in *Extemporary 9*. First of all, in the attempt of getting an honest result, which fully relies on the participants daring to speak freely by answering the questionnaire truthfully, giving both negative and positive criticism depending on their views, so that I would be able to understand and develop my signs in the best way for future usage. Krüger also highlight the importance of trust in *The Ethical Ethnographer* chapter: ”the success of your ethnographic research project will depend on creating a ’good impression’ and trustworthiness among the people studied” (Krüger, 2008, p. 98). Secondly, because I have great respect for all participants' professional career as musicians, it is therefore important for me that they feel that their opinions have been heard and not misrepresented in the study of *Extemporize*.

# Results

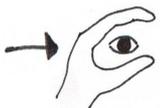
I will first describe the function of my signs. Then I will list the names of the participants and explain the videos used for this study. Followed by the results of the interviews with the participants and the coding of the videos selected.

## Describing the function of my signs

*Extemporize* consists of 24 signs, many of them concerning familiar “musical” parameters such as register, interval, dynamics, groove, tempo, space, pattern, melody/line, as well as more abstract signs. All the signs are explained and demonstrated in the instruction video. I will only describe the abstract signs in this chapter.



The sign “new eyes” means to look at your instrument or the space of the rehearsal or performance in a new way. This could for instance mean not to play your instrument in the usual way, but exploring and playing it in a way new to you, by e.g. taking it apart and only playing on one piece of the instrument or using something from the room and testing it on your instrument, or just to change your position in the room and for instance go to sit behind the drummer or in the audience.



When given the sign “new eyes” you can also get the sign “new eyes back”. With this sign you transform what you just did while playing the “new eyes” material by imitating the sound or the rhythm or the energy on your instrument, but now you use your normal technique or sound.



The sign “connect, don’t get interrupted” means to connect with someone in the group, with the assignment to only listen to what you and the ones you are told to connect with are playing, and to ignore/shut out what the rest of the ensemble is doing.



The sign “movements going up/down” means to use whatever you have been doing before, and moving it upwards, as far as your register allows you. If it is a pattern, you



move the pattern upwards, until your instrument cannot play any higher. You do the

exact opposite, if you get the sign “movements going down”.



The sign “you’ve got the ball” means you can do whatever you want. There are no limitations and you can decide the direction of the ongoing music.



The sign “change direction” means to do the opposite of what you just did. The importance here is to try and follow your immediate response of what you just did and go for your first and strongest impulse without thinking it over too much. So if you play walking bass in the middle register, your first impulse might be to play long notes in the low register or to stick to one note in the high register or to stop playing, or maybe your impulse is to start singing or jumping on the spot or to play a melody. The point is that there are a million contrasts you can pick but it is only your first impulse that counts.

## Participants and videos

I have made video recordings of two rehearsals and three concerts in the period between January 2013 and July 2014, and out of the material I have collected working with *Extemporary 9* I have selected six sections that were then presented to the performers in the interviews. Video 1 and 2 are both from the first rehearsal. Video 3 is from our debut concert in Malmö working with the core of *Extemporary 9* plus Mads Hyhne. Videos 4-6 are from a concert in Copenhagen where I work with an expanded line-up of *Extemporary 9*.

I have chosen to interview ten (Linda, Signe, Stefan, Sebastian, Martin, Mads, Kristian, Petter, Daniel and Jens Mikkel) out of the 15 participants who have worked in *Extemporary 9*. I included Linda, Signe, Stefan, Sebastian and Martin because they are the core of *Extemporary 9* and they have been part of the platform from the very beginning, taking part of the working process of developing and refining my sign system as well as developing my way of conducting. Linda, Signe, Stefan and Martin have watched videos 1-6, but only Linda got a specific question related to video 2. Sebastian has watched videos 1-3, since he is not participating in videos 4-6. Mads participated in the two concerts and watched videos 3-6. Petter, Daniel and Jens Mikkel only participated in one concert (videos 4-6) where they learned the signs, without any rehearsals but by watching a video where I go through all the

signs. Kristian also only participates in video 4-6 but has participated in other concerts with *Extemporary 9*. Petter, Daniel, Jens Mikkel and Kristian have watched video 4-6.

### **List of Participants**

Linda Bergström, vocal

Signe Emmeluth, alto saxophone

Ingimar Andersen, tenor saxophone

Magnus Aannestad Oseth, trumpet

Tyge Jessen, trumpet

Mads Hyhne, trombone

Petter Hängsel, trombone

Kristian Tangvik, tuba

Rasmus Kjærgård Lund, tuba

Daniel Hanson cederskär, bass clarinet

Martin Lundqvist, piano

Sebastian Hegedüs, guitar

Jonas Nilsson, double bass

Jens Mikkel, double bass

Stefan Schneider, drums

## **Results of the interviews and coding the videos**

The following is an account of the results of the interviews.

### **The participants experience with other sign systems**

Only three out of the ten participants (Daniel, Jens Mikkel and Petter) had worked with another sign system before playing in *Extemporary 9*. Daniel does not remember what sign system it was, but he found my system to be “more advanced” than the system he worked with, conducted by Fredrik Ljungkvist. Jens Mikkel has worked with *Soundpainting* and found my system to be more personalised. Petter has worked with a simple sign system that shows “Basic intuitive signs, play (point), play more (wave fast), long notes (horizontal line with hand), short notes (chops with hand),” he found that the biggest difference between the signs was that it was more specific:

In the sign system I've tried before nothing needs to be explained beforehand, and thus it doesn't have as many possibilities as the *Extemporary 9* ones. But it is easier to understand quickly, and mostly used between playing musicians as signs for improvised backgrounds. (Petter)

With this information I can conclude that Daniel's and Petter's previous work with other sign systems for structured improvisation with a conductor is limited, and the signs they have worked with have been a more simpler than mine. Petter also states in the interview that he has "low experience in working with a conductor over all." So, out of the 10 participants, it is only Jens Mikkel who has worked with an advanced sign system before playing with *Extemporary 9*. Signe hadn't worked with other signs before being presented with mine but she has since gained more knowledge on the subject by working with Adam Rodolphs GO: Organic Orchestra, and she was also very briefly introduced to a system Mats Gustafsson used with the Norwegian vocal ensemble *Trondheim Voices*. Signe pointed out that Adam Rudolph's system also uses notation, which provide materials to which the conductor can refer.

She also found differences between Mats Gustafsson's system and mine:

He had for every piece two different parameters (ex: high energy and volume) and then he had a coordination system (like a cross) where each line was a parameter (ex: vertical line is energy, and the horizontal line is volume). Horizontal line works like this: hands wide apart: low volume, the closer the hands comes the more the volume increases. Vertical line: closest to the ground: low energy, the more up in the coordinate system you move, the more the energy increases. Then he used silence as a factor as well. Everything you did you added to the silence. (Signe)

I also use the horizontal line for volume, but my representation of when the volume is loud or low is the exact opposite to the way Mats Gustafsson uses the sign. When my hands are wide apart the volume is loud and when my hands are close together the volume is low, almost silence. I also use the vertical line but it means something completely different in my sign system. While it refers to energy in Gustavsson's sign system it denotes register in mine.

## **Unaware of conductor**

One difficulty that can be observed in the videos is that the players would sometimes not be focussed on the conductor. For instance, Signe's reflection on the interaction between conductor and the ensemble was that the ensemble lacked awareness of my conducting. "It was okay. Not always optimal, as we were not always constantly aware of the conductor. The videos show some situations where the shifts in the music is not happening at "the right time", because of lacking communication between the musicians and the conductor". I asked her what she thought the reason was for the lack of communication and if she thought I as a conductor could do anything differently. Her response was:

The main reason is that people are not used to being conducted, therefore one forgets in the heat of the moment to be aware of you. The only thing a conductor can do is to really underline the importance of the musician's awareness.

In video 6 there are some crucial moments where Jens Mikkel is unaware of my conducting. At 5:48 I give Jens Mikkel the "remember" sign and break him off at 5:58. When I give him the sign to start again at 6:30 it takes some time for him to start. At 6:56 I have to go up on stage to establish a contact with him and at 7:12 I'm unsure if he is aware of me, because he is looking down at the floor, so I squat to get his attention. To have a quick reaction time working with a conductor is something Sebastian has reflected on:

The demand on the musicians to think and react a little faster than normal - since the path from a musical idea within one's mind to making a sound is now longer than "normal" because of the interaction with a conductor. When a sign was given I felt a responsibility to react to that sign as fast as possible in order to move the music forward and to avoid being a breakblock. (Sebastian)

In video two there are three instances where the communication between Linda and I is not happening because her eyes are closed (2:15, 2:56 and 4:10). I asked Linda if she could describe her state of mind at those moments:

When I close my eyes here, it's because I'm very much out of my comfort zone. I try to make it easier for myself by closing my eyes. And here we see the problem with that. In 2:15 I thought I was given a signal, and I guess I chose to follow because it's easier than to go against it. It can also be a bit hard to see it sometimes (even with

your eyes open) if a signal is given to a lot of people. “Was she pointing at me?” And there’s no way to ask, so if you missed it you’re a bit lost. At 2:56 the same thing happens again. “Oh my God, everybody’s quiet – what if I was given the signal?” It’s tough to be all by yourself, so again it’s easier to follow the others. At 4:10 I make it super hard to conduct. To be able to follow signals, you have to be able to see them.

Several of the participants do close their eyes when playing. Especially Linda and Signe have a tendency to do this, so I’ve asked them if they normally close their eyes when improvising and both of them answered positively. I then asked what it is like to play with their eyes open? If they feel just as creative or if it takes energy from them to be aware to keep their eyes open?

In this context it is okay. I don’t really feel different when playing with open eyes. Even though you are conducting, I still close my eyes sometimes. It can be disturbing to play with open eyes, but I don’t think it is a problem in this context as it is you who creates the creative form. (Signe)

It feels a bit scary actually. When I do crazy noises, or just things that are a bit out of my usual comfort zone, I don’t like to look at the audience (or anyone else). I don’t want to see their reaction. So in the beginning it was scary. But if I was to do it every time I stood on a stage, it would get easier. (Linda)

I asked the participants if there were moments where the signs were inhibiting and Linda’s answer was, “If you closed your eyes just when the conductor decided to mute the whole band. That tends to happen to me, since I often sing with my eyes closed.” Signe also found that the signs were inhibiting when “people are not paying attention to the conductor.”

### **Different impressions of the sign system**

The participants have many different impressions of the sign system and some are radically different from each other. For some, the signs are logical and simple to learn, and for others the signs appear to be illogical. For some, the signs give them a sense of freedom and for others it gives them a sense of constraint.

Mads's and Petter's impressions of the sign system shows how different the views are. Mads states, "there is an intuitive 'logic' to the signs that makes it easy to understand", while Petter states that, "the signs used are not very intuitive."

The core group of *Extemporary 9* all found the sign system to be simple to learn. Signe states, "I had a really easy time learning them. I think they are really logical." Signe also had a comment on her own learning process connecting with the signs, "In the beginning it felt a bit weird doing the 'unnatural' signals (new eyes, playing really loud/soft when everybody else was playing soft/loud), but then it became fine." She also made a remark on the different pace the core participants of *Extemporary 9* had in learning the signs. "I remember I got a bit annoyed with the others, because they could not remember the different signals. It is really deadening to the flow when the signals are inhibiting because you can't remember the meaning of them."

In Martin's experience "the simplicity of the signs made it possible to get it together fast, even if there were different and new people almost every time we did a concert." Sebastian also found the sign system to be easy to follow:

The interaction in terms of communication worked well for this music because the signs were quite simple enough to learn and understand, and the conductor, other than the given signs, also gave instructions in a way that was easy to follow. (Sebastian)

Stefan even found the signs "very 'interaction-stimulating'" and that they can give musicians an alternative way of thinking:

Musicians learn to listen to their instrument but also to their fellow musicians in a different, more focussed, more alert way and that definitely helps the musical interaction to take place. A lot of ensembles (without conductor) miss or have a limited way of interaction and I think the sign system could be one way to at least get an alternative way of thinking about how to play together. (Stefan)

For Daniel, working with the sign system gave him a totally different experience than the one Stefan expressed. He felt limited when being conducted, "When you play without a conductor you're given more freedom to choose your own paths and lines in the music. When someone is telling you what to do it's harder to follow one's inner voice." Signe also feels

that, “When you are being conducted it can sometimes feel restraining, as one can not follow your instant impulses the same way.” Daniel also states that, “It puts one in a situation where one doesn’t feel comfortable with the instrument”, and he found that being conducted inhibited his attention to the group and musical voice:

I find it was very hard to take in the group’s reaction to the music and to be conducted at the same time. The signals are not the problem for me. I think the concept itself is new to me and because of that I have problems expressing my musical voice. (Daniel)

Jens Mikkell also felt “constraint but in a good way. When playing with so many others, I think constraint is a good thing.” Jens Mikkell also found that the sign system developed his relationship to his instrument because, “I had to come up with a lot of new sounds on my instrument.” So being limited gave Jens Mikkell another experience than it gave Daniel. Petter shares the same opinion as Daniel in the sense of feeling constraint when being conducted and freedom when playing without a conductor.

I feel a bit restrained by the whole concept of conducted improvised music.... I personally feel that I have more freedom as an improviser when I’m playing without a conductor, and I can easily feel forced to play in a situation where it intuitively doesn’t feel natural, and I guess that because of that I didn’t interact very good with my co-musicians, almost like I didn’t play with them at all, just playing solo together with others also playing solo. (Petter)

Kristian compare the signs to the feeling of playing written music in the sense of constraint:

Some signals are more open than others, but as a general concept, they give me a sense of constraint, much like playing written music.... This method, be it interesting and partly innovative, is in its nature inhibiting. It gave space, and allowed for more complex and precise musical shifts, but effectively removed personal freedom. (Kristian)

Whereas for Martin the signs gave him, “freedom, I would say. If I compare it to the same kind of music without signs, it is more difficult to feel a musical direction. It’s more easy to have something to relate to.” Stefan also states, “the signals give me definitely a sense of

freedom!” He also experienced that the sign system broadened his musical horizon and developed his vocabulary on his instrument:

I definitely got to know my instrument in a new way when it comes to creating sounds. Listening to the drums not in the way you learn it in musical education broadens up your musical horizon when it comes to developing your voice on your instrument. (Stefan)

For Linda, Mads and Sebastian the sign system gave them both a sense of freedom and of constraint:

The signals gives me a very clear frame that I can work within, but it gives me a lot of freedom inside that frame. And if you compare it to written music, this is so much more permissive. I tend to look at each signal as a new challenge. It’s not controlling me, but giving me guidance. (Linda)

I would say that the signals both give a sense of freedom and constraint. Freedom in relation to being able to choose sound, tone etc. within the given signal’s frames, and constraint because you only get a frame in which to play. (Sebastian)

Both Petter and Linda liked the “new eyes” sign, Linda because it forces her to be creative and try new things that changes her boundaries. Petter enjoys the sign as a concept and uses it as an improvisational tool also in other contexts. Linda also likes the “text” sign and states that both signs are challenging for her.

Since I almost never write lyrics, both these signals are very pushing for me. They force me to go places that I am a bit afraid of. And I can’t just say no. But I can always tell myself “the conductor told me to do it”, throwing my self-consciousness aside. (Linda)

Stefan found the sign “connect, don’t get interrupted” interesting, because “it demands a lot of focus and musical ‘ears’” Signe was confused with one of the signs as was expressed in the following quote: “the one with follow/connect. There are two, right? And I think they are a bit unclear. The idea behind is good, it would just be nice to have it more clear.” As I understand it, the confusion does not lie specifically in the sign “connect, don’t get

interrupted” but the sign “rhythmically” or “non-rhythmically”, which I sometimes show together with “connect, don’t get interrupted” that defines if the ones who are told to connect should connect by focussing on playing rhythmically together, or non-rhythmically, either following each others footsteps or not following each others footsteps by playing a rhythmic opposite of each other.

Sebastian liked the sign, “you’ve got the ball”, because it gave him a sense of freedom within the sounding context. Especially when the sign came after having followed a very clear instruction, it gave him, “a certain musical relief when I had been following signs with more concrete instructions for a while”. Martin, on the other hand, was more drawn to the ‘remember’ sign. “It always felt effective to use that sign in some way. It was a nice dimension to switch on/off a cool ‘pattern’.” Kristian liked most of the signs since they reminded him “of a way of analyzing musical ingredients in an open setting. There was not one in particular that stood out and had a significantly bigger impact than the others.” For Mads the sign has made him “thinking in grooves on a non rhythm-section instrument.”

Petter thinks that the signs should be refined:

There are some signs that don’t look like what they mean. I can’t think of any in particular at the moment, but my feeling coming out of this project as a first-timer mostly consisted of confusion, I really think that the signs should be refined, though I can’t think of how at this moment. (Petter)

Linda suggested to add signs for color. “Now I almost never go extreme with that, but if I was given a ‘sign with as much air as you possibly can signal’, I think that could add to the music”. Sebastian thinks the music can change more rapidly with the use of more techniques from classical conducting. He suggests that this would allow me “to be able to control dynamics within a shorter moment or within just a small part of the group and to be able to make those dynamics shift more rapidly back and forth” (Sebastian).

Signe found that the signs could be used with a wider spectrum of musicians to free them from the traditional roles:

I think the signals are really cool, and a great way of working with improv. Sometimes it would be cool to give some of the signals to persons/instruments that are not obvious (give groove to a pianist/singer or whatever, just not the drummer. Or give the drummer text and see what he/she comes up with. Sometimes I don't think you use the full potential of the signals. You can really create something different and new with these, and you have with the signals a perfect opportunity to free the instruments from the traditional roles. (Signe)

### **Opinions on communication and listening**

The majority of quotes on the topic on communication and listening within *Extemporary 9* participants are that the interaction in the group becomes different when working with a conductor. All the participants for which the sign system was new, or somewhat new, all have one thing in common when commenting on the interaction in the group, and that is a frustration from not knowing the signals well enough - a topic I will go more into in the chapter below. Kristian states, "It was interesting, but more time rehearsing would make it even more natural and less stressful." Petter found it "relatively hard, as I was new to the project and got the introduction quite close to the concert (and only once)." Jens Mikkel states, "Generally it worked well. It felt as if we got a little stuck sometimes though, maybe because people didn't know the signs all that well." And for Daniel, "It worked good but it took a while to learn all the signs."

Martin's reflection on the subject is much more detailed and he found it:

Interesting and unusual not to look at the other musicians. It was more to get into a bigger shape of the music rather than small details. The action was more about to take the instruction and use it, than search for your own impulse. (Martin)

While Martin's experience of being conducted made him hear a bigger shape of the music, Mads similarly found that he interacted more specifically with other participants in the ensemble when he could not have eye contact with the other musicians: "I found the interaction intense. It forces you to be alert.... In a way you listen and work more specifically together because the conductor gives you a specific job with certain other individuals within the group." Sebastian expressed a similar experience and found that he would focus more on "hearing the music itself, rather than communicating within the group in a traditional sense":

A greater focus was created within this project - compared to other situations of improvisation. I feel that when the frames of a project, such as this, demands the ensemble to devote their attention to a conductor in order to play and follow the paths of the music, another focus automatically settles in me as a part of the ensemble that enables me to focus my mind only on the music - a task I often find difficult in other situations. (Sebastian)

Stefan also found that the situation would encourage both his listening to the music, to himself and the interaction with the ensemble, he refers to it as a state of mind with no boundaries:

It kind of got automated and you could start to listen more to the group and to your own instrument/playing. That was the fun part because then there were no boundaries set and you could be totally in the moment. (Stefan)

However, several musicians instead experienced a similar shift of focus but found it to be limiting on the interaction between the musicians in the moment of performance:

There is a limitation to the interaction between the musicians, as one does not play if one is not given a signal. Your impulses are restrained, which can be a positive thing, but again it is limiting the instant interaction. (Signe)

On the other hand she also found that the more open instructions allowed for moments of greater freedom and therefore also different modes of interaction between the performers:

The interactions between the musicians were controlled by the conductor, the music moved in addition to how the conductor wanted it to move. But still there was these 'bubbles', where one just did what one heard/wanted to do and mainly focused on the other musicians. (Signe)

For Linda, the effect of being conducted reflects her state of mind in a similar way when being on stage, "For me what happens is I don't communicate and listen in the same way that I normally do when I'm playing in a band without a conductor." She also states that one

easily can “get caught up in your own signal (if it’s a signal given only to you)” when being on stage.

### **More time for rehearsals**

All the participants express that it takes time to learn a sign system and the wish to have had more time rehearsing together. Even the core players express the need for more rehearsals “to get a tolerable relation for the effect of the signs, how loud is loud, etc” (Martin).

The core players who have had a longer process working with the signs all stated that in the beginning is all just about “remembering the signs right, so you could recognize them fast and minimize the gap between sign and music” (Martin), and that it “took some time remembering them all but when that was done they were easy to follow” (Sebastian). So for the participants to whom I only sent an instruction video explaining the signs, as well as those who had the signs explained before the concert, a general frustration and pressure occurs in many of their comments in their interview. Only Jens Mikkel doesn’t seem to feel frustrated by the situation and found that the process was “very relaxed: watching a youtube video and then repeating them backstage before the concert. You were totally calm about it, and there were no stress or sense of panic, even though we were in a hurry.” On the other hand, Petter seems to have been really frustrated with the situation:

It was a rough ride for me, because my process of learning to work with the signs came almost out of nowhere, and because of the unintuitive nature of these particular signs it didn’t come easy. I had to constantly get a translation from the people standing close to me.... A couple of times I got a sign multiple times, but I didn’t know what the sign was and had to whisper to my co-musicians and ask what the sign meant.... But towards the end of the concert I almost knew and understood all of them, or at least the ones that had been used during that particular session. (Petter)

So even though Petter stated that there is an unintuitive nature to the signs, he also managed to know and understand all the signs used during the concert. Petter also explains another situation working with a sign system where he had time rehearsing and still found the signs to be unintuitive:

I once played an improvised concert with a conductor where we met two times and rehearsed close to 4 hours both times, and the music was still confused and unintuitive,

so for future reference, I recommend at least a couple of hours rehearsing the signs, almost how you would rehearse glossary with children. (Petter)

Kristian also found that the “process rested too heavily on individual preparation.” He also states that:

The musicians had a very varying level of understanding and comfort with the signs, and in my opinion there was a bit too many signals for us too be able to learn them in the short common rehearsals. For future projects I would recommend putting together an ensemble that can work more extensively with the material as a group (rather than trusting musicians to do their homework). (Kristian)

I will no longer trust the musicians to do their homework by themselves, nor to understand the importance of rehearsing when working with a sign system. I acknowledge that it is necessary for both the participants and the conductor to have worked together with the signs for a while before doing concerts so everyone has the same vocabulary to work within.

The core players of the group also responded to how they found the concert with the expanded group. They experienced that when working with a larger ensemble the sound became less improvised and less unified. “Playing with the 9 people we were more like a band, and because we practiced, it became more of a unified sound [bandsound]” (Signe). They also found that “the role of the conductor gets more crucial in the larger group, when it’s harder to hear and communicate with musicians at the other end of the stage.” (Mads). Stefan confirms this in his statement, “I thought that it was harder to follow your conduction, since the more people play together the more difficult it gets to hold this bunch of musicians together” (Stefan). Martin also found the communication among the musicians more difficult and chose to focus more on my conducting. “With more people there was absolutely no possibility to eye contact, and harder to pick out every voice and communicate, so there was even more focus on the signs for me” (Martin).

Signe was drawn to the sound of the expanded group. “There are some different possibilities dynamically and harmonically. The chaos element is bigger the more people there are and that is cool I think.” Stefan also “enjoyed the ‘new’ sounds the ensemble got,” because it appeared to him “that the ensemble developed a stronger and more powerful voice.”

### **Conductor or improviser**

Not all the participants shared the same vision in the direction of the music with me, and therefore felt frustrated in the terms of not being able to follow their own impulses. Jens Mikkel stated:

Sometimes I felt like I would have gone in another direction personally, but listening to it now it seems that it all makes a lot of sense. So you just have to trust the conductor and let him/her shape the music however they want. (Jens Mikkel)

Petter did not trust my conducting or did not share the same musical vision as me and had a hard time to find inspiration:

There were moments where my vision of the played music didn't match with Nana's vision at all, where I couldn't find inspiration at all because of not really wanting to play at that exact moment, I wanted the music to move in one direction, but Nana wanted the music to move in another direction, which didn't feel very natural for me. (Petter)

Stefan also didn't share the same musical visions as me, but where Petter found my conducting inhibiting Stefan did not:

There were situations where my ears 'suggested' me different musical ideas than Nana instructed me, but that was not inhibiting at all. On the contrary I think since it broadens my musical horizon and forces me into new/unfamiliar situations where I have to adapt to a different way of musical thinking. (Stefan)

Linda also might have had other visions than me but, like Stefan, it doesn't seem to inhibit her playing:

When I'm conducted like this, it makes me go places I normally don't tend to go. It forces me to break my normal patterns and discover new sounds within my instrument. If the conductor tells me to do something, I have to do it and I have to make it work. I

really like this, because it challenges my inner control freak and it gave me a lot of new sounds that I work with. (Linda)

Kristian has an interesting comment on “the term conductor”. He doesn’t find it “fully descriptive in this context”, as he found my role “more an instant composer, combined with conductor.” Musicians directed by a conductor creating an instant composition also seem to have the need to control the music and accordingly, to be both the conductor and the improviser. “You have to follow the conductor, so you can’t make your own choices all the time, and that sometimes feels awkward” (Jens Mikkel). He also states that even though “I wouldn’t have made the same choices myself, but now listening back to it, your choices were better than the ones I would have made. That’s developing.” Martin also mentions a struggle with being conducted and improvising at the same time. “The hardest part was to keep going with your instructions. After a while sometimes you felt to develop away from your sign, and it was hard by yourself to draw the line.” Kristian also expresses a conflict with being conducted and to improvise at the same time. “It was fun and interesting, I was however ‘jealous’ of the conductor, and slightly frustrated, not to be able to play what and when I wanted to.” This position of wanting to be both a conductor and an improviser in this situation is interesting but steals the energy from the participants focus on creating music in the moment instead of analyzing it. This brings us back to the question of trust and to the commitment from the participants to the conductors (composer’s) idea, something Petter connects to “working with any kind of music with a producer/conductor makes you learn how to submit yourself to someone else’s musical ideas”.

### **Expanding the musicians’ vocabulary**

Working in *Extemporary 9* has for some of the participants broadened their vocabulary and increased their courage when playing music. This is something I also experienced myself. When I was introduced to Lotte Anker’s sign system it made me feel more expressive and intuitive on my horn, and this experience made me curious on exploring sounds. This is similar to Signe’s reflection on working with my sign system, where she says, “It has sharpened my interest for different sounds and the urge to do something unexpected. It might have made me more interested in jumping into things and just do it.” Mads’ reflection on working with the sign system is that “it can develop your stamina and give you a sense of

patience in free improv, by staying in a certain groove/pattern longer than you normally would.” For Stefan it gives him a different approach to listening:

It does definitely improve your musical and instrumental skills, because this way of playing music forces you to listen in a different way to the music that is being played than you are used to in other ensembles, since anything really can happen and there are no musical boundaries existing. It is about being in the moment and a totally different way of focussing, being concentrated, than in ensembles, where a lot of parameters are already decided/given beforehand. It is like being naked on stage. (Stefan)

For Martin it has helped him “to think outside. Like dynamic things, to high from low register, keep going with something specific etc.” Working with extreme contrast is something I have been curious in testing with *Extemporary 9* and in video 1 at 1:13 I deliberately tell Signe to play loud, when everyone else is playing soft, to create a big dynamic contrast, to see if the reactions of the participants is to follow Signe’s dynamics or if they stick to their instructions. But also to hear the sound of it, because I almost never hear this kind of contrast in music.

I asked Signe if it was uncomfortable to be the one to create the contrast at 1:13 in video 1 and her answer was: “No. I remember that my pulse was a bit higher, but it was not uncomfortable. I felt brave, strong and a bit exhilarated. I felt like I made a statement that I could vouch for.” The energy in the room changed when Signe started playing loud and some of the participants started to giggle, so I asked Signe if the reaction from the other musicians had any impact on her and she “thought it was kind of cool that there was this lack of response. It was nice that everything kind of kept on flowing in the same tempo after my ‘elephant entrance’.” Because she didn’t comment at all on the other musicians giggling, I asked her if it didn’t effect her that some of the other musicians started to giggle and her answer was ”No I didn’t notice it.”

I asked the other participants to describe their reactions at 1:13 when Signe was told to play loud and they were playing soft and Stefan said that “forcing me to play in this dynamically contrast opened my eyes for a new/alternative way of playing together. That way laying created a very strong tension that pushed the group, in my opinion.” To keep the contrast was

Martin's focus: "It seems like I'm more concentrating to not interact and pay attention too much, just to strengthen the dynamic contrast that arose." Linda's response was:

My brain just immediately responded to that signal without thinking. Then I went back to my signal again. But when Signe starts to play, my choice of notes changes. I play the same notes as a pattern, not as random as earlier. She gave me some kind of structure. She had the volume, so I needed to create something else for the listener to be able to notice me. (Linda)

Sebastian's answer was: "Judging from my reaction on the film it looks like I am surprised and that I like the surprise because I start smiling."

In video 6 I start the piece by giving all the participants the "new eyes" sign, because I wanted to see what would happen and immediately the room turned into the sound of a kindergarden where the children have eaten a little to much candy and many of the participants also describes being aimless and restless. I loved this over-energetic vibe but not all of the participants enjoyed this state of mind. Daniel said:

My feelings when participating and listening to the "new eyes" is that there were no focus on doing something with any musical height. People took their chances on going crazy without listening to the whole concept. After a while it becomes better but at times it feels to me like many others in the group does not take it seriously. I tried to get an idea outside the box and then stick to that. But my intentions during the performance went from trying to create music to at times during the "new eyes" feeling like being in a big joke.... At times I felt almost embarrassed and it was very hard to stay focused, mostly due to some of the other participants lack of seriousness. (Daniel)

Petter also felt that nobody was listening:

I felt aimless, everyone was playing their thing and didn't create music with the rest of the group and because of the nature of the sign, one could feel forced to play something that clashed or went against the rest of the music played, but everything was already being played and everything went against everything else to start with, it was only after a longer time when almost everyone had stopped playing that the music

started happening.... The way this worked out was almost like the music being ignored by all. (Petter)

For others it was “one of the most memorable moments with this concept!” – Linda – and the main reason for this was Petter’s and Kristian’s reaction to the sign, and the vibe it creates in the room. “The main things here for me are when Petter starts to scream and Kristian pretends to conduct. I just couldn’t focus on my own performance at that point.” Signe also enjoyed Petter’s and Kristian’s performance, “it is more fun and interesting I think, when it is not the obvious things that are expressed e.g. like Petter screaming or Kristian beating his tuba.” Kristian found that ”new eyes and the logic behind it is not unfamiliar to me”, to be “able to sustain and execute an expanding range of expressions.” Kristian also enjoyed the performance and stated: “When everyone started with the same (complex) idea, the result is a juicy, complex yet connected expression that I enjoyed being part of, and experiencing.” Petter doesn’t enjoy the performance and describes his state of mind as being frustrated and the reason for his screams, ”...a bit aimless and frustrated I think would be the closest description, and through the frustration came the silliness of my performance”. Though he sees his performance as silly, for others his expression had depth:

I think ”new eyes” functions best if you like keep to one thing. Not looping, but staying in the same area and really dig into the ”new eyes” you have chosen to do as a response to the signal. Especially when there are many as in this situation that are given the same signal. That is why fx Petter screaming is really nice because it was so clear what his response to ”new eyes” was, in that moment. (Signe)

In the composition Signe starts to support Petters screaming by responding with screams herself, and she also describes being restless and frustrated:

I tried out lots of different things, because I did not feel comfortable at any of the things I chose.... But that is mostly because of my ego. I want to be heard and be special. But in some contexts you just have to be a part of the whole, like in this one. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I comprehend ”new eyes” as ”do something solistic”-ish. (Signe)

Stefan reflects that: “It appeared to me that if everyone gets this signal it might be that the musicians adapt things of the others and are not so free in their decision/creativity.” Mads has

mixed feelings, because he doesn't want to "overthink music and 'new eyes' makes me think." Mads also found that:

Some interesting sounds can come out of it, but I don't think free improv should necessarily be more "crazy", wild or atonal than other music and "new eyes" tend to lead to that. Having said that, I still think it's an important and useful sign. (Mads)

Where Petter found that "the 'new eyes' sign should be given to a single musician, or a smaller group of the band, contrast against the rest of the music being played." Stefan found that it was "an interesting idea to give this signal to the whole group."

# Discussion

First I will discuss the different experiences of freedom and constraint working with conducted improvisation in *Extemporary 9*, then I will discuss what I have learnt from the process of working with the group and what the participants say in the interviews in terms of interaction for future projects, followed by a discussion of my findings in relation to the possible pedagogical usage of *Extemporize*.

## Freedom or constraint

This study has taught me that when conducting music with the use of a sign language it is impossible to avoid giving the participants a sense of constraint, because the role of the conductor is to naturally constrain the participants by giving them instructions to follow specific signs. As Östersjö and Frisk (2013) found in their introductory chapter in *Rethinking Improvisation*, musical freedom points more to the function of constraints than towards any magical freedom. But the scale of the experienced constraint varies from participant to participant, according to how well they know the signs and from moment to moment, depending on how strong their own impulses are in the specific moment of performance. The ad hoc musicians, for whom the sign system was new, experienced a high level of constraint within the conducting, which for many prevented them from being able to hear and follow their own musical voice, and they had a hard time playing or could not find any freedom within the conducting. Whereas the core players, who knew the sign system well, experienced a low level of constraint and for many also a high level of freedom, where the conducting gave them guidance to follow and hear their musical voice and in some cases also to discover new ways of playing.

The study also shows that the fine line between experiencing constraint or freedom is connected with the musician's ability to let go of control and trust the conductor's musical voice. The ad hoc musicians all described having analyzed the music while playing, wanting the music to go in other directions than how it was conducted. Since all of the musicians who participated in *Extemporary 9* are experienced improvisors, it requires a lot from them to be permissive and not to wish to control the music and instinctively have opinions on the big picture while playing. They are used to relying on and controlling their own musical voice

rather than being told what to do when improvising, which I as a conductor to some extent have taken away from them, and this created musical conflicts for the ad hoc musicians. Daniel felt that the signs often made him uncomfortable with his instrument and Petter felt forced to play in situations where it wasn't natural for him. Jens Mikkel, unlike Daniel and Petter, who also worked with the sign system for the first time, felt the constraint in a good way, but he was also the only one of the ad hoc musicians who mentioned watching the instruction video in the process of learning the signs. Hence he may have been a bit more prepared than the others. Bhagwati states that when we improvise, we do not make music that is free of rules. Instead we make music according to the rules, and Daniel also states that it wasn't the signs that inhibited him, but not knowing the concept well enough, and this interfered with his musical voice.

All of the participants express that it takes time to integrate the sign system and that the beginning of the learning process is just about remembering and recognizing them. But the participants had very different impressions of whether the signs were logical or illogical, simple or hard to learn; which also could be connected to how familiar they were with them as well as the working conditions under which they learnt the signs. Because the core players of *Extemporary 9* who had more time working with the signs and learnt them in more relaxed conditions all found the system to be simple and easy to learn. Even Mads, who has only worked with the sign system at four occasions (all of the concerts discussed in the thesis) found that there was an intuitive logic to the signs. Whereas most of the ad hoc musicians found it relatively hard to learn the signs, especially Petter's impression made an impact on me. He found that the process of learning was a rough ride and that the signs used were not very intuitive, but that he was able to know and understand almost all of the signs used during the concert. This makes me wonder if Petter's view of the signs could have been different if he had learnt them under more relaxed working conditions, without the time pressure, close to a concert. I acknowledge that I put too much pressure on the ad hoc musicians when expecting them to learn the signs without any rehearsals prior to the performance, by only watching an instruction video. Butch Morris' aim to always have five days of rehearsals before a performance seems to be a good rule of thumb when working with professional musicians. If working with students, apparently, much more time will be necessary.

## Interaction

The study has taught me that there are three significant factors that reflect a good foundation of interaction between conductor and ensemble. First, rehearsal time is golden for good communication and for establishing trust towards the conductor and clarity with the signs used. Second, the participants need to at all times be aware of the conductor and cannot close their eyes when being conducted, which I need to highlight for the participants, so the switches in the music are able to happen instinctively. Third, I as a conductor need to have established some kind of connection with every individual participating in the ensemble, to have an idea of what is at hand.

In video 2, from the rehearsal with the core of *Extemporay 9*, there are three critical moments where the communication between Linda and I is not happening, because her eyes are closed (2:15, 2:56 and 4:10), and Linda explains that the reason she closed her eyes was that she was out of her comfort zone. This was really surprising to me, because I interpreted her closed eyes as an unconscious act, when she was in a flow. I thought that when she closes her eyes she sounds like she is very much in the moment and inspired by the music. I have therefore never before asked her to keep her eyes open when playing in *Extemporay 9*, because I didn't want to interrupt her flow. So her statement was very surprising to me and I would never have guessed that she did this to protect herself. Signe also sometimes closes her eyes during my conducting, because she find that playing with open eyes can be disturbing at times and doesn't find it a problem to do that when I conduct, since it is me who creates the creative form, and so far there has only been one instance where I wanted her as well as Petter's attention. This can be seen in video 6 at 4:05, where they both have closed eyes while screaming but it became a fun creative moment where, after waiting for them to finish, I interact with them by screaming myself. But, in order for me to create the form for all the participants as a group, I have come to realize the importance of having the attention of all the participants and therefore also for them to keep their eyes open. Not only for me to be able to act instantly, whenever I feel like it, but also for the other participants not to feel that the signs are inhibiting due to other participants' lack of attention, closed eyes or not. Signe also stated that she found that the signs were inhibiting when some participants didn't pay attention to the conductor, which also restricts me as a conductor, because then my gestures don't get through and it is not possible for me to direct the music freely in those moments. As Linda said, you have to be able to see the signs to be able to follow them.

In video 6 there are also some moments where the interaction between Jens Mikkel and I could have been better. At 5:48 I give him the ‘remember’ sign and when I, at 6:30, give him the sign to use the context he should have memorized it takes some time for him to start. My first reflection upon watching the video was that the response from me to him should be instant at that moment, because I think that he knows what to do. But considering that the signs was new to him and this is the first time he is being conducted by me, I cannot for sure know that he fully understood that I had given him the ‘remember’ sign. Even though he is doing exactly what I want him to do, by playing what he did before I break him off at 5:58, it could also be a musical reflex. At 6:30 there are a few seconds where Jens Mikkel is unaware of me and when he becomes aware that I want him to play again there is a possibility that his first instinct is to do what he did before. Either way, it seems to me that the situation is stressful for him, because after 6:30 it is very hard for me to establish a contact with him and by the look of his body language, looking down, he seems a little closed up. At 6:56 I have to go up on stage to establish a contact with him and at 7:12 I have to squat to get his attention. This kind of situation could have been avoided with practising some more together.

One of the things I’ve learnt of my approach with the expanded version of *Extemporary 9* is that it is not enough to send an instruction video explaining the signs and then go through the signs verbally before the concert. As Kristian so well put it, the process rested too heavily on individual preparation and I for future projects should work more extensively with the material with one group of people, rather than trusting musicians to do their homework by themselves. I have also learnt that all of the participants prefer to work with the signs in rehearsals and that they all need a longer period of working time with them before doing concerts. I acknowledge that it takes time for the vocabulary to get settled in the musician’s systems and I would like for more of the participants to have the same experience as Stefan, who felt that the signs were interaction stimulating and that he could be totally in the moment because the signs got automated that he was able to listen to both himself and the group in a state of mind that had “no boundaries”. But this requires rehearsals. Not only for the participants sake, but also for my own, so that I have time to train the vocabulary with them, because I as a conductor need to know each of the participants voices better in order to feel comfortable with conducting. Sometimes, I felt inhibited by not knowing how much I could challenge and what I could expect from the “first timers”. Therefore I gave them simple gestures and often only one sign at a time, even though at many points I wanted to give them

more specific instructions, but I was not sure if they could handle it. The trumpet player Tyge I invited by a request from the tuba player Rasmus. I had never met him or heard him play before the day of the concert and I found that many times I forgot that he was there, even though he stood right in front of me, and when I gave him signs it was more because I wanted to include him in the music rather than actually having an idea of what I wanted him to play. An interesting observation is that Petter, who also played in *Extemporary 9* for the first time, but whom I knew very well, I used a lot during the concert and I always had a clear idea of what sign to give him. So if I in the future should get in a situation where I am asked to conduct a group without preparation, I will only use a small number of signs from *Extemporize*.

There is one point at 5:27 in video 4 where I give multiple instructions to a small section of the ensemble. I give them the signs “long tones”, connect, don’t get interrupted”, “rhythmically” and go away, but the whole section does not get the instruction. Only Kristian seems to follow and try to gesture to them to follow him, I think, while the other participants do not react, so I go back to conduct the long tones and tell them to continue, which they do beautifully. This part of the composition is really magical to me when I break the other musicians off, except the singer and the small section, and I remember thinking “wow this is exactly the sound I want”, and still when I listen to it now it amazes me. The outcome of the music in my opinion was incredible and the confusion little and instructive, because I learnt that by conducting the specific instruction I got what I wanted instantly and could then leave them be and they knew exactly what to do.

Another reason for the need of rehearsals are that the musicians also need to get to know my voice as a conductor so they don’t have to focus too much (or actually pay too little attention) on the conducting and can instead focus on being in the moment. Like Stefan, who more or less is able to stay in the moment and feel inspiration in the situations where he heard something differently than I conducted him to play, for him it broadens his musical horizon and forces him into unfamiliar situations when he is adapting to a different way of musical thinking. Linda is another example. She has come to enjoy the challenges of being conducted, since it makes her go in other directions where she normally doesn’t tend to go, and it forces her to break her habits and patterns and makes her discover new sounds. But Linda also states that when she is on stage she doesn’t communicate and listen in the same way as when she is

playing in a band without a conductor, because she can easily get caught up in her own signal.

I would like to avoid for participants to feel as uncomfortable as Petter in the future, who didn't find that his vision of the played music matched mine, which made him unable to find inspiration and made him not want to play, since the music moved in another direction that didn't feel natural to him. But of course, this may be impossible and one has to accept that a conducted improvisation imposes a composed structure on all the participating performers. Just like when you decide to play a notated composition, one needs to follow the instructions that make up the piece.

## **”Extemporize” as a pedagogical tool**

When teaching improvisation in ensemble, I believe sign language is an efficient musical tool in developing the student's musical abilities on many levels in terms of technical skills, personal sound, closer relation to one's instrument and ensemble playing. As this study shows, it can push the musician's limits and boundaries, increase their courage, work with their instant reactions, guide them in other musical directions, make them hear new ways of playing, develop their vocabulary, their stamina and focus within the musical performance. Like Signe who felt a little strange in the beginning when told to play abstract signs or huge contrasts that made her stick out of the group, as on video 1 at 1:13 where I told her to play her loudest when everyone else were playing very soft. But doing it made her feel brave, strong and exhilarated, and working with my sign system has sharpened her interest for different sounds and given her an urge to jump into things that might be unexpected. I think working with contrasts on some level of extremes - like different dynamics or making the musicians change direction on the spot or giving a group of 13 musicians the ”new eyes” sign at the same time, creating a chaos element like in video 6, etc. - are important ingredients in order to develop a musical voice, to dare to speak up and be heard and work out of your comfort zone. As Martin says, playing with a conductor makes him “think outside”.

Another good factor with working with conducted improvisation in ensemble playing is that the responsibility for the outcome is shared between the student and teacher, so sticking out of the group seems less dramatic, because the student will always be able to say: ”S/he told me to do it”. Or, as Linda put it, when the conductor tells you to do something you have to do

it and make it work, which she also explains has given her a lot of new sounds in her vocabulary. In my experience, paying attention to a conductor can change your focus from being inwards to outwards, as explained already in the theory chapter. Also, as Sebastian describes it, it makes your mind focus only on the music and, as Stefan says, he listens in another way, because it is about being in the moment, when everything can happen and there are no musical boundaries. So, working with signs as a pedagogical tool gives the teacher the possibility to open the students ears for new ways of playing and to change the students' directions in the moment instead of talking about it after it has been played. As Duckert and Rasmussen state, working with signs makes it feasible to communicate while playing, and the beauty of working with sign languages as a pedagogical tool is that the students don't have to be on a certain level to interact, since it is about how they interpret the moment. This allows them to explore their instrument while interacting with the other students in a musical context where right and wrong does not exist. As Morris, who worked with many different interpreters from different cultures and traditions, said, it didn't matter whether he worked with classical musicians, jazz musicians, pop musicians or non-improvisors, because he always showed the same sign but the outcome was always different. Also Faria's study shows that the structures of *Soundpainting* can help a classical musician not to feel uncomfortable when asked to improvise, because - with the signs - he can give the musicians a smaller vocabulary to interpret, and since it is combined with working in an ensemble the musician finds recognition when expressing themselves collectively.

# Conclusion

The study has given me a much deeper understanding of how my sign system is experienced by the performers I have worked with. In turn, this has given me a foundation for how to understand the possible pedagogical usage of the practice of conducted improvisation.

1) For professional improvisers and students alike, learning the sign system takes time. All projects must be designed to allow time both to study the signs and to rehearse with the group.

2) Conducted improvisation is a hybrid form that investigates the boundary between improvisation and composition. As such, it is a useful tool in many musical contexts, not only within jazz education but surely also useful for students of classical music performance and composition as well as in folk music and popular music, and for beginners as well as advanced improvisors.

3) Musicians may experience both freedom and constraint when taking part in a conducted improvisation. More rehearsal time and good working conditions is likely to create a more positive experience.

4) Sign language has the possibility to strengthen the voice and focus of the musicians and push them in other musical directions than normally which increases their courage to follow their first impulse and is a great pedagogical tool when working with improvisation.

5) The feedback from the performers has also given me many impulses to continue developing my conducting practice and the sign system I am working with.

## Future research

In the future I would like to work on getting conducted improvisation incorporated into the musical educational system and for academies to have it as a major subject, making it just as important as having music theory or ear training lessons, because conducted improvisation works with interaction, attentive listening, focus and develops the musicians' vocabulary,

which all are very important tools for expression on one's instrument, for all genres and levels. Future research that could lay the grounds for such a development could be further studies of conducted improvisation with different groups of students. For instance, what is the impact of conducted improvisation on students who are less experienced with improvisation? For my own work I imagine testing the pedagogical usefulness of my own sign language in my own teaching work.

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# Annex

## Annex 1: Liste of Videos

Video 1 - Rehearsal (clip nr. 1):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ud0TfK1qCAA&spfreload=10>

Video 2 - Rehearsal (clip nr. 2):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=se5ZHhnd3xI&spfreload=10>

Video 3 - *The World Is A Complicated Place*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MilfLQX5Sf8&spfreload=10>

Video 4 - *I Don't Know If I Died Today*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5feAqSq4nqE&spfreload=10>

Video 5 - *Two Minutes*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkLLhUDYQB4&spfreload=10>

Video 6 - *Love Is Like A Back With Broken Bones*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5atcveyY20Q&spfreload=10>

Video 7 – Instruction video, explaining the signs of *Extemporize*:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_gpbzKF15HQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gpbzKF15HQ)

## Annex 2: Questionnaire

### General Interview Questions

1. Have you previously played in an ensemble conducted with a sign system for structured improvisation?
2. And if so, which sign languages have you worked with?
3. Could you describe any differences between the systems?
4. How did you find the interaction between conductor and the ensemble in our project?
5. How did you find the interaction between the musicians compared to a performance without conductor?
6. Could you describe the process of learning to work with the signs?
7. Were there moments when the signs were inhibiting?
8. Does working with conducted improvisation develop your musical and instrumental skills in any particular way?
9. Did any of the signs have a special impact on you?
10. Does working with these signs develop your relation to your instrument?
11. Can you, or do you use the concept, when playing with others?
12. And if, in what contexts have you used them?
13. Do the signs give you a sense of freedom or of constraint?
14. Is there any of the signs you would like to change?
15. When looking at the videos are there any particular moments that might relate to any of the questions above?

### Specific Interview Questions

Questions for Signe and Linda:

1. Do you normally close your eyes when improvising?
2. And if so, what is it like to play with your eyes open? Do you feel just as creative?  
Does it take energy from you to be aware that you have to keep your eyes open?

Questions for Signe (Video 1):

- How is it to be told to play loud, when everyone else is playing soft?
- Was it uncomfortable to be the one to create the contrast at 1:13?
- What impact did the reaction from the other musicians have on you?

Questions for rest of the group (Video 1):

- Describe your reaction at 1:13 when Signe was told to play loud, when you were playing soft?

Question for Linda (Video 2):

- There are three moments where you have your eyes closed, can you describe what happens/state of mind (2:15, 2:56 and 4:10)?

Question for core group (Video 3-6):

- How was it to play with more people/new people (video 4-6) compared with (video 3)?

Video 6:

- What was it like to get the *new eyes* sign and did it have any impact on you that everyone got the sign together?
- Can you describe your state of mind?