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# The jazz storyteller:

## Improvisers' perspectives on music and narrative

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### Abstract

The term 'storytelling' has a long history of prominence in descriptive and prescriptive talk about jazz improvisation. The main aim of this article is to point out that the ways in which jazz musicians themselves employ the 'storytelling' metaphor with reference to jazz improvisation display several important perspectives on perennial and fundamental problems in the field of musical narrativity and offer very efficient ways of dealing with these issues. The empirical interview study summarized in this article constitutes an attempt to decipher the full potential of this intermedial conceptual loan, *jazz improvisation as storytelling*, based on how it is used by a number of highly accomplished Swedish jazz musicians. From a theoretical point of view, there are severe difficulties involved in viewing any music as narrative. The aim of the empirical study is to provide means for understanding jazz musicians' conceptualizations of their art form; to investigate how they deal with such difficulties. The interviewees favour a metaphorical rather than literal interpretation of the concept of storytelling: for instance, as communication, expression, mission or vision. Their understanding of storytelling tends to focus on the *how*—rather than the *what*—of narrative. In their view, the narrative potential of jazz is connected in significant ways to the music's ontological status as *situated activity*, including perspectives that concern the construction of musical meaning through narrativization of intra-musical patterns, as well as the significance of cultural competence. In sum, jazz practitioners' understanding of jazz 'storytelling' emerges as an important way of dealing with issues of meaning in music.

**Keywords:** intermedial metaphor; jazz improvisation; narrativization; storytelling

'I come to be a storyteller; I'm not a jazz musician, I'm really a storyteller through music.'

This is the very first sentence in jazz pianist Randy Weston's autobiography (Weston and Jenkins 2010: 1). The term *storytelling* has a long history

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of prominence in descriptive and prescriptive talk about jazz improvisation (Bjerstedt 2014). Perspectives of narrativization have come to structure the ways in which players, audiences, critics, theorists, teachers and students think and act with regard to jazz improvisation.

Arguably, however, the notion of storytelling in this context has not to a sufficient extent been made the object of problematization. In musicological and philosophical literature, musical narrativity emerges as a field marked by severe theoretical difficulties. The main aim of this article is to point out that the ways in which jazz musicians themselves employ the 'storytelling' metaphor with reference to jazz improvisation display several important perspectives on fundamental problems in the field of musical narrativity. This argument is based on empirical evidence from a recent empirical study. I present and discuss a number of general problems connected to the view of music as narrative. Arguing that these problems are addressed in successful and very interesting ways by jazz practitioners, I then relate these issues to the perspectives of jazz improvisation that emerge from a recent qualitative interview investigation including fifteen Swedish jazz musicians of national and international renown. Before I set out to do this, I will provide a few preliminary reflective remarks regarding the richness and potential of the storytelling metaphor in jazz improvisational contexts.

## **A rich and potent metaphor**

The word storytelling is a compound: we have the *story* and we have the *telling* of it; the noun and the verb, the product and the process, the improvisation and the improvising; and, further down the line, we have the multi-layered dynamics of convention, coherence and individual creativity. Storytelling in the jazz context is imbued with meaning.

Verb or noun? Is storytelling a noun? Should the story be in our focus of interest, namely, *that* which is told, whether it regards a state of soul or some set of structural, intra-musical aspects? Or should 'nounizations' be avoided; is storytelling rather a verb, a gerund (Attali 1985; Mackey 1998)? Small (1998) strongly advises against all reification: 'improvisation is all process; there is no product' (301). Should we, then, rather focus on the *telling* of the story, namely, the process rather than the product? Or, with Nachmanovitch (1990), conceive of the music experience as an 'indivisible, interactive entity' (143)?

Small (1998) advocates a view on music as activity rather than entity. According to Small, it is 'the act of musicking that is central to the whole art of music the world over', so that 'whatever meaning there is in music is to

be found in that act' (51, original emphasis). According to such a perspective, jazz improvisation should be understood not as an object of art but as an artistic act: the process of improvis-*ing*. Small holds that 'there is no such thing as jazz, but only musicians who play in a certain manner and listeners who like to listen to them doing so' (13).

The noun/verb distinction may be seen as the linguistic manifestation of a profound dichotomy which, according to Small (1998), is both ontological and cultural: 'The European tends to think of music primarily in terms of entities, which are composed by one person and performed to listeners by another... The African musician, on the other hand, thinks of music primarily as action, as process, in which all are able to participate' (45). The compound story-telling allows us to oscillate between two ways of viewing: either we focus on the (de-personalized) noun or entity, the *story*; or on the verb, the process or activity (in which all may participate), the *telling*.

According to Monson (1996), jazz musicians 'often prefer metaphorical description' to theoretical analysis (93); for example, one type of metaphor uses the term language to mean 'musical style and syntax' (85). Furthermore, Schippers (2006) argues that the use of metaphor in music educational practices in general has great potential as a teaching tool for communicating understanding of music-making. From these points of view the task to decipher, as it were, the storytelling metaphor in the jazz context emerges as a crucial one. What does this term stand for?

DeVeaux (2000 [1997]) discerns several qualities that contribute to the storytelling of the saxophonist Coleman Hawkins's improvisations (on his 1939 recording of 'Body and Soul'): 'a continuous, carefully controlled crescendo of intensity', 'relentless linear logic', 'building seamlessly to a shattering climax' (97–98). Needless to say, while concepts of coherence and structure must be viewed as important dimensions of jazz storytelling, they alone are not enough. In scholarly, critical or biographical literature on jazz music, a number of concepts are put forward as relevant to storytelling qualities in jazz musicians' improvised output, for instance: *coherence*, *semantics*, *rhetoric*, *intra- and extra-musical memory*, *musical interactivity*, *linearity*, *temporality*, *sound* and *embodiment*.

Out of all these aspects, coherence has been prominent in jazz musicians' and jazz theorists' conceptualizations of the art form. Harker (1997, 2011) analyses Louis Armstrong's improvisational development as a quest for coherence. Knauer (1990) employs the term *Spontankomposition* to designate particularly felicitous jazz solos on record that have been copied, studied and re-created by numerous musicians. Tirro (1979) points to the 'strong

internal logic' in the jazz saxophonist Lester Young's solos (252). Interviewed by Daniels (1985), one of Young's colleagues, trumpeter Buck Clayton offers his explanation of musical storytelling from an architectonic perspective: 'telling a story simply meant that it must have a logical structure, a beginning, middle, and conclusion, melodically and harmonically' (318). Kernfeld (1995) contends that one important kind of jazz improvisation is formulaic, pointing out Charlie Parker as the greatest formulaic improviser in jazz.

Commenting on Harker's (1997) emphasis on improvisational coherence, Iyer (2004) remarks, however, that this trait 'seems more reminiscent of verse than narrative', but that it might perhaps be viewed as 'just one facet of a larger, richer, and more complex narrative structure' (393). Iyer summarizes his understanding of the storytelling metaphor: 'The story dwells not just in one solo at a time, but also in a single note, and equally in an entire lifetime of improvisations. In short, the story is revealed not as a simple linear narrative, but as a fractured, exploded one' (395). Gustavsen (1998, 1999), on the other hand, advocates 'the need for metaphoric multiplicity', contributing to a greater variety of perspectives in jazz studies by way of five 'polarities' or 'dialectical challenges' drawn from psycho-dynamic theory.

The storytelling metaphor's very focus on a linguistic phenomenon may be perceived as an unfavourable restraint on its power. Monson (1996) objects to language being perceived as the 'general model of relationality' and reminds us that 'metaphors placing language at the center of the universe...may or may not be fully applicable to non-linguistic phenomena such as music' (209). The notion of jazz 'storytelling' is a common metaphor that has been in use for quite some time. Notwithstanding, it could arguably still possess the power of constant surprise, as it were. In an empirical interview study (Bjerstedt 2014) I attempted to decipher the full potential of this intermedial conceptual loan, *jazz improvisation as storytelling*, based on how it is expressed by a number of highly accomplished Swedish jazz musicians. What meanings do they ascribe to the term 'storytelling' in connection to jazz improvisation? As indicated above, the main point of this article is to show how these musicians' understanding of their craft can be seen as offering very efficient ways of dealing with some perennial problems regarding music and narrativity. In the next section, I will present a brief outline of some of these issues.

## Music as narrative: problematic issues

The power of music has been viewed in many ways from the Orphic mysteries of ancient times (Kivy 2009) over eighteenth-century medical discourse

of homesickness (Johannisson 2001) to current jazz (Bjerstedt 2014); the notion of improvisational storytelling is but one branch on an old and voluminous tree. One central feature in this context is the idea that music can communicate in ways that are more or less similar to those of language. Notwithstanding, linguistic models of music have their obvious problems. Hanslick (1986 [1854]) argued that music has no semantic content: '[t]he content of music is tonally moving forms' (28–29). Stern (2010), on the other hand, discusses how the time-based arts 'move us by the expressions of vitality that resonate in us' (77). This could be seen in relation to Small's (1998) argument that music is not a thing but something that people *do*. There is arguably a significant connection between music's narrative potential and its ontological status as an activity which is situated. Any stories told through musical activities reasonably have something to do with the specific social settings in which these activities are carried out. In his analysis of the concept of black music as a product of racialized discourse, Radano (2003) formulates his perspective on music and discursivity: 'music's place in the social and its impact on the listener develop from the way that sound actually inhabits the very tissues of the discursive' (18). This points to crucial aspects of the dynamic socio-cultural interplay that may prevail between discourse *on* music and discourse *in* music (Folkestad 1996; Johansson 2008).

Linguistic models of music can be traced back to writers on music theory from at least the early eighteenth century on. Modern theories of language and interpretation (for instance, those of Derrida, Barthes and Gadamer) would support the view that music as well as language is part of human discourse. Other modern theories of prominent interest to the study of music include Bakhtin's (1981) relational view of language as meaning created in a dialogical relationship, as well as Foucault's (1972) concept *discursive practice*, a body of anonymous, historical rules which form a framework for what is possible to say, do and perform in a given context.

The notion that music can actually communicate something is indeed an old one. Notably, Robinson (1997) devotes more than one third of her anthology on music and meaning to the topic of music as storytelling (termed 'the literary analogy' [103]). The notion of musical narrative, however, has been problematized. To begin with, it is easy to realize that many things cannot be represented in music, not even the simplest ones. Ferruccio Busoni has already pointed out the impossibility of 'a musical representation of a poor but contented man' (quoted by Brown 1987 [1948]: 234). On the other hand, it might be argued that such a representation is

actually possible in a specific cultural context, namely, if the music quotes the melody of a song which the listeners can identify as a song about a poor but contented man (such as, for instance, the Swedish song 'Torparvisa').

Kivy (2002) specifies the following requirements for musical meaning: 'What must be shown is that absolute music exists as a representational or linguistic system' (199). This notion of music as language has been problematized. In Hermerén's (1986) opinion, for instance, to speak of music as a language is 'more confusing than clarifying' (15; my translation). One of Abbate's (1991) most important arguments against the view of music as narrative may be her contention that music lacks the temporal 'pastness' of literary narrative. Neubauer (1997) suggests the term *temporal depth* which, he claims, describes a feature of music that 'can be created by means of repetition and variation' (119). Nattiez (1990), on the other hand, agrees with Abbate that music has no past tense: 'It can evoke the past by means of quotations or various stylistic borrowings. But it cannot relate *what* action took place in time' (244).

This brings us to the inevitable question of *referentiality*. According to Nattiez (1990), music lacks the *semantic specificity* which it would need in order to be narrative. Nattiez agrees that music suggests narrative, but he considers it an ontological illusion to state that music is narrative. He adheres to the distinction between story and discourse (between *what* is told and *how* it is told) put forward by Chatman (1978). The story, that is, the content of a narrative, can be unfastened from its linguistic medium and taken on by another one, another kind of discourse, film or comic strip. In Nattiez's opinion, this distinction is vital in order to understand the dissimilarity between literary and musical narrativity.

In contrast with such a 'medium dependent' conception of narrative, Meelberg (2009) proposes a definition of narrative as 'the representation of a temporal development' (253). Meelberg considers the performance 'an integral part of the narrative itself'. It is not just an interpretation of a narrative: 'Each performance of the same musical piece has to be regarded as a new musical narrative, a new work' (257). On a similar note, Almén (2008) suggests that music's lack of semantic specificity might 'be viewed as a positive characteristic, in that music can display narrative activity without being limited to specific characters and settings' (13). In Kramer's (1991) view, music's relation to narrative is that of a *supplement*, an *accompaniment*. Wolf (2005) terms such supplementary practices *plurimedial* combinations of music and a narrative (non-musical) medium. Even if music in itself is not narrative, this will not exclude the possibility for listeners



to experience it as such. Nattiez (1990), though criticizing vigorously the 'superfluous metaphor' of musical narrativity, still points to the *narrativization* of instrumental music, and Wolf (2002) points out that narrative is one of the most powerful schemas of meaning construction in human thought. In his approach to the subject of narrativization, Neubauer (1997) favours the term *emplotment* rather than narration.

In sum, a number of concepts emerge as pertinent with regard to musical narrative. Among these, I have touched upon the relevance of music's status as a socio-culturally situated activity; music's ability to possess temporal depth, referentiality and semantic specificity; as well as music listeners' narrativization or emplotment of music. In the next few sections, I turn to the results of my recent empirical study (Bjerstedt 2014), based on extensive qualitative interviews with jazz musicians. In the light of the presentation of the problem-ridden field of musical narrativity, I will argue that this empirical investigation provides a very convincing response to such difficulties. In brief, jazz practitioners' understanding of jazz 'storytelling' emerges as an important way of dealing with issues of meaning in music.

## **Jazz improvisation as storytelling: an adequate description?**

A good improvisation is about the same thing as a good, captivating story when you sit at a child's bedside at night (Trumpeter Peter Asplund).

The main aim of the fifteen qualitative interviews I conducted with Swedish practitioners in the field of jazz (Bjerstedt 2014) was to shed light on how the informants perceive the term storytelling as a picture or description of what jazz improvisation is about. Is it accurate? Are there better alternatives?

The strategic selection of the participants focused on (i) a high artistic level—all of them are of national renown, some of them very successful internationally—as well as on (ii) a documented willingness to engage in verbal communication regarding topics related to their profession. In addition, the selection was guided by (iii) the aim to include a large proportion of informants well experienced in educational aspects of their trade.

The interviews were carried out in 2010; several of them in the informants' homes, while others took place in a number of different locations such as offices, rehearsal rooms and hotel lobbies. Before each interview, I presented brief overviews of my research project twice: the first time by

letter as the interviewee was asked to participate in the investigation, and the second time verbally when we met for the interview. Consequently, my interest in the concept of storytelling in jazz improvisation was well known to the participants. All of them had also said that this, in their opinion, seemed an interesting topic to talk about.

The fifteen informants were: Peter Asplund (trumpet; b. 1969); Elise Einarsdotter (piano; b. 1955); Bengt Hallberg (piano, 1932–2013); Lars Jansson (piano; b. 1951); Ulf Johansson Werre (trombone, piano; b. 1956); Anders Jormin (bass; b. 1957); Roland Keijser (reeds; b. 1944); Jonas Kullhammar (reeds; b. 1978); Gunnar Lindgren (reeds; b. 1941); Joakim Milder (reeds; b. 1965); Nisse Sandström (reeds; b. 1942); Amanda Sedgwick (reeds; b. 1970); Ann-Sofi Söderqvist (trumpet; b. 1956); Lena Willemark (vocal, violin and härjedalspipa; b. 1960); Lennart Åberg (reeds; b. 1942).

The interviews were loosely structured (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). All of them commenced with the question ‘What makes a good jazz improvisation good?’ By not introducing the term storytelling as my topic of interest at the outset, I hoped that the interviews might provide me with a better overview of the informants’ perspectives on jazz improvisation as a whole, and, eventually, of how the concept of storytelling fitted into the picture according to them. Apart from the opening line, there were no preconceived questions; each interview would turn out as a series of consequences of the interviewee’s reply to this question and my follow-up questions. The main aim of this formulation of the introductory question was to provide prerequisites for a general picture of the interviewees’ views of important quality criteria for the work of the musician, thereby enabling me to analyse their conception of storytelling in relation to their overall ideas in this field. The average time duration for an interview was around 90 minutes. Transcriptions were carried out by the interviewer, namely myself, and sent to the participants for comments and corrections. The interviews were conducted in Swedish. The informants’ statements have been translated into English; Bjerstedt (2014) includes both the original statements and translations.

‘Storytelling’ in jazz improvisation is not necessarily interpreted by the informants as a narrative structure. When, occasionally, the term is understood in a near-to-literal sense by an interviewee, this may raise his or her doubts about its applicability to the field of jazz improvisation. Rather, it is interpreted in a *non-literal*, *non-narrative* manner as a statement, for instance, as an expression of the player’s own emotional experience.

In the view of several informants, such an expression ought to be put forward in a direct and truthful way. The concept of *authenticity* is considered

crucial. At the same time, storytelling in jazz improvisation is also interpreted as a *contextually situated* activity where not only the soloist is of importance but the fellow musicians and the audience as well.

A number of aspects are mentioned in the interviews where musical 'stories' clearly are seen as different from linguistic ones. Among other things, it is pointed out that even though listeners may conceive of an improvisation as a 'story', it does not follow that the improviser has actually intended to tell one. Since improvising is at the core, informants hold, there is no need to strive for perfection; it is more important that the improviser come forward as a human being. The personal instrumental 'voice' is of importance. In the opinion of some, 'storytelling' in jazz improvisation might be best understood through holistic concepts (such as, perhaps, 'urgency' or 'need'). Furthermore, in general, music is viewed as having more expressive potential than language; hence the content of musical 'storytelling' is not considered translatable into words.

The following presentation of the informants' conceptualizations is divided into five parts: (i) the understanding of music as narrative; (ii) the metaphorical understanding of 'storytelling' as communication, expression, mission or vision; (iii) the music listener's construction of meaning through narrativization; (iv) the significance of cultural competence, as well as of (v) musical patterns.

## **i. Understanding music as narrative**

In the brief section above on music and narrative, I could provide no more than a few indications of the many different problem areas that musicologists, philosophers and others have addressed in this field. The *how* and *what* (or, perhaps, *where*) of musical storytelling are potentially eternal questions. Once posed, they tend to remain paradoxical dilemmas for musicians, listeners and analysts to ponder. If music's status as a language as well as its narrative capability are called into question, how, then, are you supposed to be able to tell stories in or with music? And is there 'really' a story in the music, or is it all in the listener's imagination? Indeed, the questions regarding the semantic content, temporal depth or emplotment of music may seem both numberless and insoluble. In these next few sections, however, I will argue that the musical understanding of jazz musicians, as it emerges in the interview statements, may contribute a wealth of very interesting perspectives regarding issues of music and narrative.

Peter Asplund is all for the storytelling metaphor: 'One hundred percent. Really.' Joakim Milder responds in a similar vein: 'Yes, definitely.' Lars

Jansson agrees, offering a description of the bass player Red Mitchell's solo playing as an explanation:

You paid attention. You paid attention. Just as a storyteller who can captivate his children by the camp fire... Wow! Easy to follow, easy to understand the logic in the choice of notes and the rhythm and the breathing of the phrases, all that, the gestures.

However, Ann-Sofi Söderqvist maintains that 'it is a matter of something more abstract'. Using the trumpet soloist Miles Davis as an example, she points out how difficult it is to answer the question 'what is it really that you tell?'

I think he's a real storyteller when he plays. But what does he tell? That isn't that easy to make concrete... I experience a lot of melancholy, quite a bit of loneliness in his expression. At the same time, I think there is a shimmering light, something almost a bit sublime, which also makes the other musicians around him raise themselves in a way. And he has a tone that goes straight into you. I only have to hear one note to know that it's him. But melancholy, loneliness...it isn't at all certain that he feels it that way. Maybe he doesn't feel that way at all. Maybe it's only me thinking of it that way, because it hits something within me... 'This is the sort of human being I am' may be what you tell, in a way. And then there is... That is the beauty of jazz music, that space.

The picture of how jazz improvisers tell stories can be problematized in several ways. In Lars Jansson's opinion, such problematization can be the product of ways of thinking that are determined by cultural contexts: 'That it's fluffy, that it's difficult, that it's mysterious—and yet it's so simple; that opposition is what I think we have difficulties with in the West. We want orderliness, to be able to explain things, to prove...'

Jansson perceives a connection between storytelling in jazz improvisation on one hand and the improviser's personal and musical maturity on the other:

I think I've got more structure, more content, more sound and expression over the years. I think so. And that's because you have worked with yourself on different levels. Experienced more things... if you tell stories from your heart, then you carry your own luggage. Maybe therefore this storytelling ability that you are asking about demands that you get a little older, that you have received a few blows, that you have been around a little.

Gunnar Lindgren is loyal to the view that storytelling is an essential function of jazz improvisation as well as of several other artistic expressions.

*Storytelling*, that's exactly what it begins and ends with... It really is the story of the heart, and it does not matter whether it's told through a saxophone or a line and a gesture in a theatre. It's really the same thing.

Lindgren points out that the way a story is told depends on the storyteller:

If the same story is told by ten different persons, that story will be different every time... That is to say, the one who tells it can give it an expression which is just his own... the great storytellers, you know... It must be that it comes with a kind of sincerity and naturalness.

Nisse Sandström comments on the point that storytelling could be viewed as a question of *how* rather than of *what*, pointing out that he does not view the storytelling of jazz improvisers as the communication of a certain message:

It is about *how* you convey this. Stanley Turrentine...when I hear him I really hear a black priest. Not literally, of course, but the black priest's rhythm... Rhetoric... It is in his marrow. It isn't something he has learnt, but he has been influenced, in church, by the priest's way of standing out there, conveying this rhythmic message. And Turrentine does it with his tenor.

In 1950, Bengt Hallberg as a young piano soloist was mentioned as a 'storyteller' in a blindfold test in an American jazz magazine. He recalls that he was very surprised by this designation and has no idea which were the qualities that had given cause for it.

To me the approach was, how should I put it, purely theoretical. If it's an A-flat seventh, then you play those and those... Then there were not as much expressions of emotion at that time, either. Or perhaps they were unconscious. But it wasn't something that I strove for... Rather, it was to...shape the music according to a logical pattern, a distinct pattern.

Roland Keijser finds storytelling in jazz improvisation 'rather compulsory' and goes as far as to question the possibility of its non-existence.

In a broad sense, you put yourself in some kind of storytelling situation. In fact. Like a role... Whether you dedicate your music to God, or if you stand there playing bebop, then it's a tribute to Charlie Parker, who's a kind of God, or whether you stand there playing in order to find yourself, or if you want to be famous, no matter how far you wish to shrink the project, so to speak—it's still a sort of story. Then you tell about that even if it may often be unconsciously or completely unintentionally.

Amanda Sedgwick does not think that telling stories is a natural aim for jazz improvisers. Rather, in her opinion, it is the natural effect

of having something to say. The natural aim is to play. You have a natural impulse and a passion for doing what you do, whatever you are doing, in this case playing music. It is not as if you think: now I am going to tell this story... I think the whole thing, going in with an intention to do something special, is going to fail. For if this passion to play isn't enough in itself...it's going to be rather shallow. That's my opinion... And to have a good thing together. It makes good stories, but it isn't something that you sit down and plan.

Joakim Milder calls a deliberately non-storytelling improvisation an 'interesting aim'. However, he does not consider it a real possibility: 'To tell stories—it's sort of beyond our control. We don't have to worry that it won't tell anything.'

The term 'language' arguably is often used metaphorically with regard to jazz music. Several scholarly investigations testify that jazz musicians favour language metaphors when they speak of jazz (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996; Schwartz 1996). The results of the present study provide further material to corroborate this phenomenon. Speaking of the 'codes' in different jazz contexts, one informant employs language metaphors: 'What language is it in this group, which dialect?' Another one associates certain drum solos with African language. Yet another interviewee offers an elaborate overview of similarities between the structures of language and jazz improvisation, including perspectives on the grammatical structure of conversational statements in jazz solos: 'Language consists of elements on different levels...then there are dialects and all kinds of languages in the world...you often take the liberty of mixing small meaningful formulae from widely differing language dialects.'

On the other hand, a great many informants throughout the investigation emphasize that they find language blunt and poor in nuances, when compared to music. For instance, commenting on these *differences regarding expressive potential*, Peter Asplund argues that there is perhaps no expression in the Swedish language for an intermediate position between *älska* (love) and *tycka om* (like); music on the other hand, in his opinion, is richer in nuances.

Joakim Milder expresses a similar view, pointing out that there is a strange paradox between the musicians' desire to be exact and their inability to understand what they play.

Spoken language has universal meanings. It's in order for us to understand each other. We use these simplifications. But there is no correspondence in the playing. That is why we are not even capable of understanding ourselves what it is we are playing, or what we express, or even what we wish to express. But, as any player can testify, you have a satisfactory feeling of emptiness when you have played that which needed to be played. Something has been formulated.

With regard to the argument that a story is always told by a storyteller, one aspect of the differences between composed and improvised music comes forward as a handy response: the improviser, on the face of it, could easily be seen as the narrator. Insofar as the individual solo is, in some sense, equated with a story, this is clearly a reasonable view. It should be noted, however, that there are alternative perspectives on how and on which level jazz narrates. For instance, Liebman (1996) positions the story told in jazz music at a more general level: if the concert is a novel, then each composition is a single chapter within which 'the solos are like paragraphs' (34). Such a view on storytelling in jazz obviously leaves the analyst with remaining questions very similar to those described above.

Speaking of the limitations of language, Elise Einarsdotter finds that there are boundaries for the speakable: 'some secrets ought to remain secrets'. Lena Willemark points out that the difficulty to explain everything in words may be a good thing rather than a disadvantage. I suggest that when formulating these perspectives on music and language, the informants no longer stick to the same metaphorical use of the term 'language'. Instead, they use the word in a literal sense. For instance, Ulf Johansson Werre views with scepticism the risk that a conception of music as language might imply theories of translatability: 'Music is a world of its own. You can say that you play in a storytelling way, but I don't think that what you have told can be translated into a story of words.' Joakim Milder points out that musical expression should not be confused with specific meaning; there is not something there to be understood in the sense of being translated to language: 'Actually, we play *instead of*, it is that simple... This needed to be expressed.' Obviously, in order to understand these different utterances correctly, and in order to avoid contradiction, we need to distinguish between literal and metaphorical use of the word 'language'.

In sum, the jazz musicians in my interviews clearly address several issues that are closely related to the 'problem areas' of musical narrativity. In particular, several informants problematize the notion of semantic content in music, its referentiality. Arguably a key statement is provided by Nisse Sandström when he distinguishes—just like Chatman (1978) and

Nattiez (1990), though without their terminology—between the story and discourse of narrative, that is, between *what* is told and *how*, arguing that the latter is crucial: ‘It is about *how* you convey this.’

## **ii. Understanding ‘storytelling’ as communication—expression—mission—vision**

The use of metaphorical descriptions in order to communicate ways of understanding music-making is a common phenomenon in jazz as well as in other music forms (Monson 1996; Schippers 2006). In this section I will argue that jazz musicians’ ways of using the concept of storytelling with regard to jazz improvisation may be seen as interesting attempts to solve a number of theoretical problems connected to the notion of musical narrativity.

Different points of view in the empirical study seem compatible with the perspective that storytelling in jazz ought to be interpreted in a metaphorical sense. Lennart Åberg points out that storytelling in jazz improvisation is not about narrativity in a strict sense: ‘It is not as if you can tell: “oh, yesterday a strange thing happened to me”... You show your feelings.’

Ulf Johansson Werre touches upon the distinction between literal and metaphorical interpretations. He is inclined not to use the term storytelling with regard to jazz improvisation, since a literal interpretation of it would imply that music could be translated into words. On the other hand, he freely acknowledges a metaphorical interpretation of an utterance such as Lester Young’s ‘But what is your story?’ In the interviewee’s opinion, this might be taken as meaning: ‘what adventures do you have in store? Where is your personality?’

I suggest that storytelling need not mean narrative. The term may be interpreted as meaning, for instance, communication or expression. Communication, to be sure, is a much wider concept than storytelling. Telling stories—in a literal sense—is only one of several ways to communicate. Notably, Anders Jormin points out that communicating and being personal should not be used synonymously with storytelling: ‘You can communicate in other ways than with stories... “Personal” can mean easily identifiable.’ Bengt Hallberg also connects storytelling in jazz with the concept expression: ‘It may be something about storytelling, that you still have a need to express yourself, even if you think that it’s mostly about notes and rhythms.’

Arguably, jazz improvisation can also be *much more* than a mere expression of feeling. In the opinion of Ulf Johansson Werre, the storytelling concept is too narrow to mirror its great potential: ‘In certain solos you



can hear: wow! It's revealed...the meaning of being a human being. How could you translate that into words?... To reduce that to a story would be to flatten it out.' In the words of Anders Jormin, storytelling in jazz may be a question of 'a vision or a mission, even—it's beyond words'.

A metaphorical interpretation may nullify the demand that narrative be linear. In accordance with Iyer's (2004) view, storytelling in jazz improvisation may consist in a holistic, embodied, personality- or attitude-based—hence, non-linear—approach. If linear aspects of storytelling are less significant in certain instances of jazz improvisation, these instances may be less marked by processiveness, by notions such as implication, determination and expectation (Kramer 1988). Notwithstanding, such improvisation may be perceived as storytelling, provided that aspects such as sound and embodiment contribute to the music's expression, communication, saying something.

Notably, the scope of metaphorical interpretations of the storytelling metaphor with regard to jazz improvisation is quite a wide one. On one level, the improviser can be understood to communicate and express, using the improvisation as a medium of *communication* and *expression* of, for instance, emotions, attitudes and states of mind. On another level, what is mediated may be understood in terms of a *vision* or even a *mission*. Interestingly, not only do such interpretive perspectives always corroborate the view of music as a situated social activity; they also coincide in important and, to my mind, elucidative ways with Small's (1998) perspective on musicking, which he understands as the exploration, affirmation and celebration of 'ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be' (13). Importantly, in addition to these implications of a metaphorical interpretation of the storytelling metaphor in jazz, the strategy to avoid a literal interpretation of musical narrative arguably emerges as a possible solution to a number of theoretical difficulties with regard to, for instance, semantic specificity.

### **iii. The listener's construction of meaning through narrativization**

Even though questions regarding music's status as language and its narrative potential pose serious problems, the *how* of musical storytelling is not the only dilemma. There is, of course, also the *what* (or *where*) question: Is there 'really' a story in the music, or is it all in the listener's imagination? Several of the jazz musicians I interviewed seem to adhere to the view of musical narrative as the listener's construction of musical meaning through narrativization or emplotment (Nattiez 1990; McClary 1991, 1997;

Neubauer 1997; Wolf 2002; Maus 2005; Meelberg 2006). Ann-Sofi Söderqvist remarks à propos her own listening impressions when hearing a Miles Davis solo: 'melancholy, loneliness...it isn't at all certain that he feels it that way... Maybe it's only me thinking of it that way, because it hits something within me.' Nisse Sandström remarks that 'There simply isn't anything more subjective than the things we are talking about. People simply don't hear the same things.' Lennart Åberg thinks that 'experiencing a solo as a story is probably within the listener, not the performer... I think much fewer musicians think "now I'm going to tell a story" than the number of listeners who experience a solo as a story'.

On the whole, the musicians I interviewed do not seem to aim at telling stories in their jazz improvisations: 'When I play myself, I have never tried that: ah, I will tell a story'; 'I can't say that I enter the stage with the ambition to tell a story. I think the best conditions are when you are completely neutral.' Not all informants think that storytelling in jazz improvisation requires an intention to 'say something' on the part of the improviser. According to Amanda Sedgwick's view, storytelling is not the jazz improviser's aim but the effect 'of having something to say. The natural aim is to play... It is not as if you think: now I am going to tell this story... It makes good stories, but it isn't something that you sit down and plan.' Saying something, then, according to this view, is a consequence of the musician's aim to play music (provided that she has something to say).

Several informants doubt that jazz improvisation could exist *without* telling some sort of story:

To tell stories—it's sort of beyond our control. We don't have to worry that it won't tell anything.

Whether you dedicate your music to God, or if you stand there playing bebop, then it's a tribute to Charlie Parker, who's a kind of God, or whether you stand there playing in order to find yourself, or if you want to be famous, no matter how far you wish to shrink the project, so to speak—it's still a sort of story. Then you tell about that.

In sum, these jazz musicians seemingly tend to view musical narrative in jazz improvisational contexts as the (possibly inevitable) result of the listener's reaction, rather than of the musician's intention.

#### **iv. Cultural competence**

Arguably, music's capacity of conveying something (such as 'storytelling') ought to be understood socio-culturally, as part of an intricate interplay

between discourse *in* music and discourse *on* music (Mendelssohn-Bartholdy 1878; Folkestad 1996; Radano 2003; Johansson 2008). Every jazz listener is situated in a specific socio-cultural context. Arguably, the listener's narrativization of music may be dependent on cultural competence (Wittgenstein 1967).

A number of interview statements corroborate the view that hearing music as narrative may depend on the socio-cultural situatedness of the music, its performers and listeners. Lennart Åberg points to how a certain cultural competence in the listener may facilitate the understanding of the story told by a jazz soloist, for instance, Charlie Parker's introductory phrases on the recording of 'Parker's Mood': 'ba-dobede-dweededede—de-dweededede-deyde... You can hear that it is someone complaining. You have all the blues lyrics tradition at the bottom of it, so you add that, of course.' Peter Asplund points to Hollywood movies as a reference for understanding images that may be connected to improvisation, which seems to suggest that the (listener's and/or player's) construction of meaning may be seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon:

I definitely think that you draw power from your own experiences, and perhaps, unfortunately, also from the Hollywood movies... So I find it very hard to think that you could play something that did not immediately turn into images.

Asplund also points to certain culturally conditioned *codes* which presumably are well-known to the listeners:

We have seen so many Hollywood films where a certain kind of harmony and a certain instrumentation have been devised for certain scenes... You play in a certain fashion and you know that thanks to Hollywood everyone in the audience will know what you are after.

These statements are well in tune with Nicholson's (2005) contention that Signifyin(g) practices may well be relevant to European jazz, though since its cultural and historical background differs from that of (African) American jazz, it draws on 'a different cultural heritage' (177). The *cultural memory* (Floyd 1991, 1995), though different in content, is relevant.

The role of *imagination* and imaginative power in storytelling comes forward as an interesting perspective. One ought probably to distinguish between the imagination of the mind of the player on one hand, and the listener's imagination on the other. It is conceivable that any narrativization involved may be a matter of one party but not the other.

In sum, the perspectives on musical narrative provided by the informants' statements point to the relevance of socio-cultural situatedness—the cultural memory and cultural competence, in particular—of both musicians and audience.

## **v. Musical patterns**

The listener's narrativization of a piece of music may depend on socio-cultural context to a high degree. The view that it should be completely without relation to the music itself, though, comes forward as counterintuitive. What in the music, then, can provide the basis for such narrativization; for instance, what features in an instrumental jazz improvisation might make the listener hear a story? According to one perspective, events in instrumental music may imply narrative through patterns of continuation and change, highlighted by Newcomb (1987) as 'the musical analogue to paradigmatic plots' (167). A number of the informants I interviewed seem to share this view to a degree; when speaking of jazz storytelling, they employ words such as logic, pattern and organization. These views, summarized in the next few paragraphs, are in tune with Gushee's (1991) notion of the *rhetorical plan* of jazz improvisation. Monson (1996) has problematized the relation between architectural and communicative aspects of jazz improvisation, suggesting that the latter may be of greater consequence to its storytelling quality. Notwithstanding, the informants' views regarding intra-musical qualities come forward as highly interesting complementary perspectives to the extra-musical issues presented above, such as communication, expression, narrativization and socio-cultural contexts.

Lars Jansson analyses the reasons why a certain solo would seem as if you heard a storyteller captivating his children by a camp fire: 'Easy to follow, easy to understand the logic in the choice of notes and the rhythm and the breathing of the phrases, all that, the gestures.'

Bengt Hallberg is inclined to view jazz improvisation as structures rather than stories. In his view, to improvise is 'to shape the music according to a logical pattern'. To him this is 'mostly about notes and rhythms, not about what you could characterize as events or drama'. Still, however, he speculates that storytelling in jazz 'could be a wordless drama, but...what's that?' He interprets the term storytelling in this context as referring to coherence and to 'that the music leads somewhere... That there's a desire to...how should you put it...to follow the flow of time...in a reasonable way, a musical way.' In the view of this informant, one important challenge for the improviser is to master the paradoxical dynamics of coherence and contrast:

'Monotony can be very charming sometimes, but unbearable in the long run... Still, it...hangs together in some strange way. Perhaps that's the art of storytelling... It becomes a question of organizing time.'

To be sure, there would be no discourse of the 'jazz voice' nor any blind-fold tests if jazz were not permeated by divergent thinking. The prevalent musical ideals of jazz include strong individuality. On the other hand, Crop-ley (2006) points to the significant amount of convergent thinking in jazz improvisers, exemplified by Charlie Parker's 'licks', the 'organized reuse of the already known' (397). Arguably, the creation of coherence calls for convergent thinking.

It might be suggested that several agendas may prompt an improviser to reuse motivic elements, for instance: (i) the reference to, or advancement towards, important role models; (ii) the establishment of a recognizable solistic 'profile'; (iii) the construction of musically coherent structures; and (iv) the strive for contrast, a point of relief, or perhaps a last resort.

Soloistic simplicity is also an important feature in the opinion of several informants. Lars Jansson holds that musical simplicity ('logical and *inside*') goes well with other qualities such as sound and presence. Nisse Sandström holds that this kind of simplicity, which he considers to be a wealth in improvisation, could be the product of active planning on the part of the improviser: 'now I'll play as simple as possible'. Another solo quality has to do with the improviser's aim for contrast.

Sandström also describes in some detail how a solo by Lester Young ('These Foolish Things', 1944) grows into becoming a story:

You start a bit quietly, like. And then he proceeds in this...and tension sets in, which he himself creates, through his choice of notes, and through the rhythm. He goes into a few rhythmic things...and, hell, then it's a story.

In a similar vein, Peter Asplund describes his ideal of a jazz solo as a captivating bedtime story: 'it should start from the beginning and be exciting, have a plot, and then a lot of exciting things should happen and there should be some sort of unravelling.' He also describes the structure of dynamic development in a jazz solo as a 'dinosaur shape: start soft, then it gets big in the middle and then it gets thinner'.

Issues of temporal depth are among the theoretical difficulties connected to musical narrativity. As noted earlier, it has been argued that music lacks 'pastness' (Abbate 1991). I suggest that several of the informants' views regarding intra-musical patterns may be highly relevant as creative musical strategies to deal with these difficulties. Narrativization,

emplotment, indeed, the possibility to evoke the past, may be acquired through the use and reuse of motivic elements, of quotations and stylistic borrowings. In turn, such use and reuse may be viewed both from a semantic perspective, as parts of rhetorical strategies such as Signifyin(g) (Floyd 1991, 1995), and from a structural perspective, as elements in the construction of dynamic development.

## Conclusions

Conceptualizations of storytelling in the context of jazz improvisation are broad and complex. Language structures reality; and, as noted initially, language has come to structure the ways in which players, audiences, critics, theorists, teachers and students think and act with regard to jazz improvisation, through the use of the 'storytelling' metaphor. Significant parts of what matters in jazz improvisation must be understood, then, in relation to the dynamics between individual, subjective experiences and the culturally and historically constituted usage of the word storytelling to designate musical practice. As Finkelstein (1988 [1948]) observes, the language shared by performers and listeners is of the greatest importance to the construction of jazz improvisation; and the word storytelling is one significant element in the shared understanding of the music.

I believe the 'metaphoric multiplicity' advocated by Gustavsen (1999) may in fact be satisfied by the storytelling metaphor alone, for, just as was pointed out by Iyer (2004), this metaphor can—and, I suggest, should—be interpreted in multiple ways. To begin with, the interviewees clearly favour a metaphorical rather than literal interpretation of the concept of storytelling: for instance, as communication, expression, mission or vision. Importantly, their understanding of storytelling tends to focus on the *how*—rather than the *what*—of narrative. In a sense, two perspectives that were mentioned in the beginning of this article appear to be at the foundation of all jazz music: *individuality* coming forward through *structured sound*. These notions emerge among the most important perspectives of the informants' understanding of jazz as storytelling (cf. sections ii and v, especially). Furthermore, in the view of the jazz musicians I interviewed, the narrative potential of jazz is clearly connected in significant ways to the music's ontological status as *situated activity*, including perspectives of communication as well as of cultural competence.

This is the place to return to the notion—introduced at the outset—of jazz storytelling as simultaneously process and product. The musicians I interviewed tend to focus on the *how* rather than the *what* of musical

narrative, that is, on the *telling* of the story rather than on the *story* itself. As noted, the compound storytelling allows us to oscillate between binaries, between complementary ways of viewing: we may focus on the de-personalized noun or entity, on the verb/process/activity in which all may participate. This binary of being/doing—or of the story/the telling, of the works/the acts—might perhaps even be mapped onto the binary Europe/Africa.

According to performative perspectives (Butler 2004), what is traditionally viewed as qualities should rather be perceived as something people *do*, not something they *are*, or *have*. Such a perspective renders crucial the question of *identity* behind the actions of a human being. Butler's response to this question is negative; there is no identity behind the performed actions. I suggest, however, that the concept of construction implies that some sort of essence is thinkable. In a way, this is similar to other pairs of concepts such as, for instance, nature and culture: if we reject the concept nature, this would arguably render the concept culture meaningless. I would argue that in order for our usage of concepts such as performance and performativity to be meaningful, the meaning of contrasting concepts such as identity (or genuinity, or sincerity) is crucial. Thus, I suggest, identity does exist, though as a process rather than as something static. It may be necessary to conceive of concepts such as essence and construction in a dialectic fashion: essence may be characterized by a continuous process of becoming, and construction may exist at all times in its very coming into existence.

In the view of Ricoeur (1983–85/1984–88), narrative includes the inner dialectics of personality; the narrative identity *changes*. The dialectic perspective on identity thus, I believe, comes forward as fruitful with regard to the storytelling jazz improviser's identity. On one hand, this identity ought to be viewed as a continuous improvisational *process* of construction. On the other hand, this construction (or performance, or improvisation) exists at all times in its very coming into being.

In this article, based on an extensive interview study, I have presented a number of concepts of relevance to jazz musicians' understanding of jazz improvisation as narrative ('storytelling'): for instance, socio-cultural situatedness, cultural competence, meaning construction through narrativization of intra-musical patterns; and the metaphorical interpretation of 'storytelling' as communication, expression, vision or mission. Needless to say, these concepts can and should be made the object of further discussion and problematization. On several different levels of abstraction, all of

them are included in perspectives and discussions throughout musicological and philosophical literature on music as narrative, as well as throughout my interviews with Swedish jazz musicians about 'storytelling' in jazz. In interesting ways, these observations point to modes of understanding of storytelling in jazz improvisation that are arguably of pertinence to musicians and scholars, as well as listeners; these modes of understanding could be related to Bruner's (2004) notion of story as construction, which suggests that stories could be perceived as being constructed rather than having happened. In an attempt to summarize this investigation of jazz narrativity very briefly, I suggest that the ontology of improvisation may be best understood as *the construction of identity in improvisational performance*.

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