

**Imagination in the creative process of  
*kantele* improvisation:  
Exploring the concepts of *runo*song culture in  
contemporary folk music**

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<b>Abstract</b>	
<p>This paper examines the connections between imagination and the creative process of improvising. In addition to that, pedagogical aspects of using imagination in music lessons were examined. The research question is: in what ways can imagination be part of the creative process of improvisation? In this research, the concept of ‘improvisation’ is applied stemming from the context of ancient <i>kantele</i> playing tradition. In the older layer of Finnish folk music, the <i>runosong</i> culture, the ancient zither-like string instrument <i>kantele</i> was central and the nature of music in <i>runosong</i> culture was improvisational. For conducting this research and analysing the data, principles of a qualitative approach were followed and for collecting the empirical data, semi-structured interviews were used.</p> <p>As the main findings, imagination is seen being inseparable from creativity and improvisation. To improvise, to ‘play one’s own power’, means to play one’s imagination and from that perspective, imagination is the core of improvising. Also, imagination is closely connected with the values that improvising has for the participants – the freedom of body and mind and non-judgemental thinking. Imagination is there in the improvisation through these values and at the same time carrying its essential quality of freedom. Moreover, using imagination in music lessons has long-term benefits for the students. It helps the students to find a personal relationship with the music, develop creativity and trust in themselves. Using imagination is a fruitful way of growing students’ well-being in education.</p> <p>I suggest that even nowadays the ancient <i>kantele</i> improvisation style which is the core of this research, is successfully applicable to other instruments and different musical situations. In addition, the impact of using imagination and improvising in music lessons could be seen in a wider social and cultural context. Using imagination in the teaching and learning processes and applying such values as freedom, equality and non-judgemental thinking could contribute into a better well-being in both, personal and societal level.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b>	
Imagination, improvisation, <i>kantele</i> , <i>runosong</i> culture	
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# 1 Introduction

This paper examines the connections between imagination and the creative process of improvising. In this research, I will apply the concept of ‘improvisation’ stemming from the context of ancient *kantele* playing tradition. In the older layer of Finnish folk music, the *runosong* culture, the ancient zither-like string instrument *kantele* was central. The nature of music in *runosong* culture was improvisational, although described through its own terms that will be discussed in the conceptual framework of this study.

Being a *kantele* player myself, I use improvising for composing, practising, and performing. For me, imagination plays an important role in the creative process of improvising. In this paper, I will interview Finnish folk musicians who use improvising in their daily practises for creating music. Particularly, I examine the interviewees’ relation between imagination and the creative process of improvising. In addition, I will study, how imagination can be used for teaching music and improvising.

Although in the ancient *runosong* culture, *kantele* was the central instrument (Kastinen 2020), similar improvisational traits of the same time period appear when studying, for example, music played on *jouhikko*, an ancient Karelian bowed lyre, or singing *runo* songs. Above all, it seems that this ancient improvising practise was not limited with instrumentation but was rather a way of thinking. Therefore, I suggest, that even nowadays the ancient *kantele* improvisation style which is the core of this research, is successfully applicable to other instruments and different musical situations. This research aims to widen the understanding of the ancient layer of Finnish folk music and thereby build up a broader context for the ancient *kantele* music.

In chapter 2, I will introduce the theoretical background of this study. First, I will present the concept of ‘improvisation’ and its connections with the ancient *runosong* culture. Second, I will describe the meaning of ‘imagination’ in the context of my study. I will then open up some pedagogical aspects of both, improvisation and imagination. Chapter 3 describes the implementation of the study: I present the research purpose and question and thereafter I write how my study was carried out.

This includes explaining the methodology and data collection as well as data analysis methods and process and research ethics. In chapter 4, I present the findings of this research. I will examine, according to the research question, in what ways can imagination be part of the creative process of improvisation. After that, I will also highlight some of the ways of how using imagination can be useful in a teaching process. Finally, I will conclude with discussion and offer some ideas for further research based on this study and its findings.

## 2 Conceptual background

In this chapter I will open up some perspectives on the concept of improvisation and its connection with the ancient *runosong* culture. I will also introduce the main theoretical viewpoints for analysing imagination in terms of my paper. After that, I will look into the pedagogical aspects of improvisation and imagination.

### 2.1 Perspectives on improvisation: from ancient *kantele* music to a contemporary context

The concept, ‘improvisation’ can inhibit many various definitions, approaches and practises. Being a complex term, it has recently more and more been an object for critical studies and the inquiry of improvisation has become more interdisciplinary (Lewis & Piekut 2016). This research does not aim to define ‘improvisation’ as such but seeks to deepen the understanding about improvising and offer a wider context for analysing it.

The roots of the word ‘improvise’ go back to Latin *improvisio*, meaning ‘unforeseen’ and to Italian *improvvisare* “to sing or speak extempore”. Also, it appears to be quite a recent coinage – in the early 19th century, it was in English regarded as a foreign word and generally printed in italics. (Online Etymology Dictionary.) The origin of the term ‘improvisation’ might be connected with its wide use especially in Western music discourse. Nevertheless, a wider approach to improvisation across the cultures has been mainly studied by ethnomusicologists. (Nettl 1998, p. 2) Nettl (2009) describes improvisation as an ambiguous term that creates its meaning in the cultural context.

It has gradually become clear that the things that we call improvisation encompass a vast network of practices, with various artistic, political, social, and educational values. [...] It’s the music of certain cultures in which nothing is consciously memorized or otherwise recorded, and also of cultures in which a sharp distinction is made between what is precomposed and what is created in the course of performance. Its value differs by culture. (Nettl 2009, p. xi)

As Nettl has written, improvisation is a term that can be used across cultures and through that its meaning can vary. Solis (2009, p. 1) has noted, that improvisation – seen in the broadest sense as the practise of making compositional decisions in the moment of performance – is part of virtually every musical tradition in the world. Therefore, in this research, I share the attitude that as much as there are different musics in the world, that much there are ways of talking about improvisation. Next, I will introduce the context of *runo*song culture, the ancient Karelian music culture.

### 2.1.1 Improvisation in the old Karelia

*The kantele*, a type of zither, has been known in Finnish culture as well as neighbouring cultures for hundreds of years (Rahkonen, 1989). It is a member of the Baltic psaltery family and has evolved into a multitude of diverse instruments of varying shapes, sizes, structures, playing techniques and strings, ranging from five up to forty (Kastinen 2021). The oldest type of *kantele* in Karelia was carved from one piece of wood and had typically five strings. It was closely connected to the art of singing the ancient type of poetry, *runo* – rune singing. In terms of *runo* songs it was significant both to accompany *runo* singing as well as a significant motif of the *runo* songs themselves. The descriptions of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century travellers and explorers, among them Joseph Acerbi, Carl Axel Gottlund and Elias Lönnrot, paint a picture that the *kantele* was a typical artifact in the lives of the rune singers. (Rahkonen, 1989) For this research I use the term ‘*runo*song culture’ for referring to the older layer of culture, where singing *runo* songs was deeply connected with playing *kantele* and which survived the longest as a vivid culture in the villages of Karelia, which is nowadays divided between Finnish and Russian territories.

There are not many sources to describe the *kantele* playing itself in detail; an extensive portion of them were collected by A. O. Väisänen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and there are also a few documents from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Väisänen along with a few other researchers wrote down detailed facts about the traditional *kantele* players they could find, mostly in remote villages in Karelia as well as their playing techniques, instruments, tuning methods and scales. (Kastinen 2021, Kastinen et al. 2013,

Kastinen 2020, Väisänen, 2002/1928.) Nevertheless, these sources give us possibility to interpret, what the ancient *kantele* music could have sounded like.

Different collectors have mentioned in their notes that there were situations where an introverted musician plays for hours just for themselves, oblivious to their surroundings whilst simultaneously enchanting those who hear them play (Kastinen 2021). Väisänen named this phenomenon *hiljainen haltioituminen* – the quiet exaltation (Väisänen 1990/1943, p. 43), while the *kantele* players themselves spoke of *soittaa omaa mahtia* – playing their own power which could be understood as playing their inner strength and knowledge (Raja-Karjala 15.7.1911; Relander. 1917, 19–20; Warttinen 1987/1923, 90. Cited via Kastinen 2021) In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the people in Karelian were still under the influence of the ancient *runo* song culture and they were also illiterate (see, e.g., Siikala 2014, 102; Härkönen 1926, 29, 43; Sjöström 1896, 25; Forsström 1894, 150. Cited via Kastinen 2021). Presumably, their cultural memory reached back many generations. (Kastinen 2021)

For example, Relander described a situation from the year 1882 in a Karelian village:

The best *kantele* player I've ever heard was in the village of Lahti by the lake of Säämjärvi. We had heard of him before, and as soon as we arrived in the village, we sent for him. He did come, but modestly he said he could not play anything. He had frozen his fingers recently, and therefore, he claimed, he could not play anything. Since we still insisted him to play, he played a few dances claiming he knew no more. We left him in peace and thought that he had been praised in vain. One of us went to shoot the ducks, one cleaned his gun, and one was writing his notes. The *kantele* player was forgotten. He sat alone in his corner, his *kantele* on his knees, staring in front of him. Gradually he began to play softly, at times warming up and getting more excited, at others so that he was barely audible. On being told that this was precisely what we wished to hear and being asked what was it that he was playing, he replied that it was nothing, that he was simply playing his own power. We, therefore, left him in peace, each going about our business. But the *kantele* player, no longer asked any questions and being left in peace, played throughout the evening, and we listened to him to our delight. (Engl. transl. Arja Kastinen) (From the



expedition to Olonetsia in 1882. Relander 1917, 19–20. Cited via Kastinen 2021)

Like the *hiljainen haltioituminen* and *soittaa omaa mahtia* described *kantele* improvisation in their cultural context, scholarly studies about improvisation across different cultures have brought along many other culture specific terms next to ‘improvisation’. I have found these studies inspiring for building up my own discourse for this paper. For example, McNeil (2017, pp. 116–132) writes about the concept of improvisation in Hindustan music. Instead of ‘improvisation’ he offers a term of ‘seed ideas’ to describe the process of improvising and musical thinking in that culture (McNeil 2017, p. 125). Racy (1998, pp. 95–112) analyses Arab music using the terms of Arab culture. His descriptions of ‘creative ecstasy’ relate closely to the term ‘*hiljainen haltioituminen*’ that I apply in my research. Moreover, he brings in several additional parallels from other musical cultures. For instance, in Persian classical music, improvising in a *dastgāh* (melodic mode), a musician may experience *ḥāl* (literally, state or condition), a Sufi-related term that in this case refers to a deep introspective state of inspiration that leads to highly ecstatic performances (Racy 2015, p. 5).

As we can see, a cultural context can give a very different meaning to improvisation and therewith a different way of talking about it. Racy (2009) notes that cultures vary in their attitudes towards improvisation. He writes that improvising music is a polysemic phenomenon and in order to understand its multi-layered significance, we must see some connotations like creativity, individuality, inspiration and tradition (Racy 2009, p. 321). In that regard, looking at improvisation in a multicultural context brings us into a wider discourse, where improvisation can be described with different vocabulary. In this research, I will focus on imagination as one of the key features in this vocabulary and examine its connections with connotations like the ones suggested by Racy.

## 2.2 Imagination and creativity

I will offer some perspectives how to define imagination and what is the main theory for analysing imagination in terms of my paper. First, the Encyclopaedia of creativity offers a compact definition for imagination. According to that, though being closely connected with creativity,

imagination is a broader term that encompasses the multi-faceted capacity to transcend our current time, place and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, become absorbed in the narratives created by others, and consider remote and close alternatives to actual experiences. (Taylor 2011, p. 637)

Similarly, Hargreaves (2012, pp. 1–3) writes that imagination can be seen as the cognitive basis of musical perception and production. According to him, the term ‘imagination’ encompasses a much broader range of concepts and behaviour than ‘creativity’ would do. He brings out an important distinction between imagination and creativity.

Imagination is essentially perceptual: those mental representations which arise in music listening are internal, and not directly observable. Creativity, on the other hand, involves production: imagination is very likely to have been involved, but it is used in the creation of some kind of product. (ibid.)

Similarly, Bertinetto’s (2013) describes imagination as a vehicle for creativity. He writes that the abductive nature of imagination creates the path that the process of art production follows (Bertinetto 2013, pp. 71–74). He distinguishes between two different imaginations. *Organisational imagination* gives improvisation coherence and allows both the improviser and the audience to follow it. *Creative imagination* gives the coherence originality and aesthetic qualities that are required for art to be valuable and authentic. Nevertheless, the way imagination works as a vehicle for artistic creativity in performances are unforeseeable and the aesthetic outcome depends greatly on coincidental factors. (Bertinetto 2013, pp. 89–92.)

## 2.2.1 Pedagogical aspects of improvisation and imagination

When looking at the pedagogical aspects of improvisation, it is important to remember that different cultures have different attitudes towards improvisation (Racy 2009, p. 314). The question of how to learn and teach improvisation are closely connected with cultural and societal issues. Juniper Hill (2012) has studied how cultural ideologies can affect creative activities in music. According to her, different cultural values, attitudes and belief systems may affect musical creativity by inhibiting, encouraging, restricting or liberating it. The beliefs of which kind of people are able to be musically creative, are taken for granted as they can be highly internalized into cultural conventions and formalised in institutions (Hill 2012). Moreover, creativity could be seen as a social fact, which according to Frith (2012) means that certain kinds of activity give people a particular social status and such way of thinking is influenced by social institutions.

In that light, the question of who can be creative in music can be seen as socially constructed and given further in educational institutions. Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) discuss that

improvisation might be a way of placing musical imagination at the centre of the educational process, and to proceed to modes of musical practice that address issues of being and thinking together, thus becoming a form of socio-musical and thus political practice. They write that improvisation permits students to become agents of musico-social action (Wright, Kanellopoulos 2010, p. 83).

In this paper, I will study how creativity could be developed through improvising in the music lessons and what are the benefits of using imagination in these lessons. I will research imagination in the context of ancient *kantele* playing style and study the relations between imagination and creativity in this specific case. As a starting point for examining the pedagogical aspect of improvisation in folk music, I use a doctoral dissertation by Leena Joutsenlahti (2018), where she discusses the concept of “making music from one’s own head”. She opens this concept through an overview about improvisational nature of Finnish folk music (Joutsenlahti 2018, pp. 29–42). Thereafter she describes her own path in folk music studies and finding her “own

music” as an artist (Joutsenlahti 2018, pp. 43–61). Having a long teaching experience, Joutsenlahti (2018) discusses the pedagogical benefits that making music from one’s own head” can have to one’s musical development. She suggests that

children are not defined by what they cannot do; instead, they are defined by what they already know how to do. This must be taken into account when creating a teaching context. (Joutsenlahti 2018, pp. 9–10)

In terms of folk music and ancient way of *kantele* improvisation practise “making music from one’s own head” is an accurate term because it corresponds to the terms used by the *kantele* players themselves at that time, like “playing one’s own power” (“*soittaa omaa mahtia*”). Joutsenlahti (2018) writes about improvisation in the specific context of Finnish folk music, which aligns with my research topic. In addition, Joutsenlahti (2018, pp. 86–100) talks about the importance of imagination when teaching improvisation. According to her, recognizing imagination as an important tool for improvising and encouraging to use it is one of the most important tasks of the teacher. In the context of Finnish folk music, Joutsenlahti (2018, pp. 170–171) compares the songs that her students improvised with *runo* songs, they are deeply authentic and talking about children’s own life in their own musical language.

In my own view, the pedagogical process of improvisation is deeply connected with encouraging the student to use their imagination. Analysing imagination offers more concrete tools and vocabulary for understanding the process of improvising and furthermore, helps to notice the unpredictable factors of that process.

## **3 Implementation of the study**

In chapter 3, I present the research purpose and question and thereafter explain how I carried out the study. I describe the methods that I used as well as data collection and analysing processes. In addition, I discuss the ethics of the research.

### **3.1 Research purpose and question**

The research task is to examine the connections between imagination and the creative process of improvising in the context of the *runosong* culture. Also, I will research the pedagogical aspects of using imagination in music lessons.

The research question is: In what ways can imagination be part of the creative process of improvisation?

### **3.2 Methodological framework**

For this research I used a qualitative approach, which Hammersley (2013) describes as:

A form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasize the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis. (Hammersley 2013, p. 12)

The data collected for this research consists of many subjective experiences and individual explanations, and therefore my way of analysing it is interpretative. The process of research, is hermeneutic, uncovering meanings as meanings to the topic were given by the researcher as well as the participants. (Cohen, Manion, Morrisson 2018, p. 293) For achieving knowledge and understanding of the text as a whole, the hermeneutic circle requires considering the ‘dialogue’ within boundaries set by both, the researcher and the participants (ibid., p. 325).

For collecting the empirical data for this data-driven research, I used semi-structured interviews, where questions were open-ended. Also the wording and order of the questions were adjusted to each individual participant and their responses given. (ibid., 511)

### **3.3 Data collection**

For this research I carried out interviews with four folk musicians, who use improvising in their daily musical or performing practise. All of them were familiar with the approach of the ancient Karelian *kantele* improvisation and used it in their practises. Also, they all were familiar with *kantele* playing, but it was not necessarily their main instrument. Moreover, all four interviewees had an experience of both studying music and teaching it.

Participants of the research were informed beforehand about the topic of the research and research question, but not the interview questions (see Appendix 1). Three of the interviewees answered the questions in English and one in Finnish. The interview had five main questions with several subquestions, which also varied depending on the background of the interviewee. The interviewing style was rather conversational (Leavy 2017, p.139). I let the interviewee talk without interrupting with next questions and therefore during that I got answers to some of the questions without needing to ask the questions. I found that avoiding interrupting them helped me to retain the objective atmosphere and avoid influencing the answers. Also, it helped me to keep my position as neutral and equal as possible (Cohen, Manion, Morrisson 2018, p. 306). Nevertheless, all the questions were answered by each of the participants and the topic seemed to awake a lot of thoughts, which resulted with quite a lot of interesting information for me. The length of the interviews was 40-90 minutes each.

In accordance with the recommendations for pandemic in January 2021, all four interviews took place in the video call platform Zoom to avoid physical contact. I also used the application to record the interviews as both, video, and audio files.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

As explained above, my data analysis follows a qualitative approach (Hammersley 2013, p. 12). As English is not the mother tongue for any of the interviewees, I gather info more from the descriptions and explanations rather than specific words used. Either is the English vocabulary comparable with the answers in Finnish. Also, as the order of questions and answers in these interviews was not identical for all four interviews, I considered the context and run of the conversation when interpreting the answers (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2018, p. 293).

For preparing data for the analysis, I named the files with the date and name of the interviewee. Also, to make it easier to distinguish many files, all files of the same interview received a similar name. I transcribed all the interviews to be able to see the text when analysing. For that, I used the video files so that I could see again the mimics and gestures of the interviewees. This helped me to interpret the answers more adequately. I structured the texts according to the topic/question, although it was challenging when the topics were overlapping, when an interviewee answered at the same time to several questions or answered to the same question in different places of the conversation.

For analysing the data, I also used coding method, which helped me to pattern, classify and later reorganising them into emergent categories for further analysis. (Saldaña 2014, p. 584) As codes I used these topics that rooted from the research question even though the actual question might have been asked and answered elsewhere. As codes I used among others also the most important keywords of my research like 'imagination', '*omaa mahti*' or 'freedom'.

### **3.5 Research ethics**

The research is conducted according to the principles of Finnish National Board on Research Integrity guidelines TENK 2019 and TENK 2012. Following the principles for a responsible conduct of research, the methods applied for data acquisition as well as for research and evaluation, conform to scientific criteria and are ethically

sustainable. All the publications used for writing this research is cited and brought out in the reference list. (TENK 2012, 30)

According to the ethical principles for research with human participants, any risk of harming the interviewees was avoided. All participants took part in the survey voluntarily and they had right to discontinue or at any time withdraw their participation in the research. Also, they were informed about the research contents, their personal data usage and practicalities about conducting the research. (TENK 2019, 50–52)

For protecting the privacy of the research participants, all personal data that was not needed in order to carry out the research, including the interviewees' names, was removed from the research data (*ibid.*, 56–57). Instead, pseudonyms like Musician 1, Musician 2, Musician 3, and Musician 4 were used and throughout the research, I avoided revealing any other personal information about the participants. In the start of the interview, all interviewees were informed of their rights and how their personal data will be used, and all of them gave me full permission to use the data from the interview for writing the research. (*ibid.*) Also, they will have possibility to read the results of the research from this paper. Following the current official recommendations, interviews were carried out in the video call platform Zoom to avoid contact and possible spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic.



## 4 Findings

The four interviews conducted were all diverse, expressing individual viewpoints and experiences of the interviewees. Despite to that, the content and topics they brought out, were remarkably similar. My findings are divided into three main sections. First, I present how participants described their imagination and what imagination means for them. Second, I describe the values that interviewees brought out about practising the ancient style of *kantele* improvisation. Third, I introduce the pedagogical qualities that the participants described about using imagination in teaching music.

### 4.1 Imagination

The data analysis revealed that for the participants, imagination is very important in the creative process of improvising. All four interviewees had their own view on how to describe or even define imagination and there were several common thoughts on that.

First, imagination can be seen as a tool as suggested by Musician 1:

I feel that imagination is a tool, it's like a camera, 3D or 4D camera that wants to grasp something what is true. For example, it can be a color, imagination wants to form a color, or wants to form a scenery, or wants to form a feeling somewhere in the inner truth.

Imagination as a tool for improvising connects it with the concept of creativity. Bertinetto's (2013) view of imagination is, as explained above, that it is a vehicle for creativity, it enables creativity to appear and therefore also to improvise. Musician 1 compares imagination with a camera:

I took this camera, because it kind of wants to form the whole picture. There is everything inside there. For example, my imagination goes quite often to the nature or a lovely forest. So I try to picture the light that comes through to or from behind the leaves, or the trees, and then I try to feel the moss under my bare feet. Or I try to feel the air and the scent. So I try to form the whole

picture. So some kind of, it's improvised. Imagination is a tool. Yeah, it's a tool. (Musician 1)

The data analysis showed that there is a close connection between imagination and creativity. Moreover, they were seen as inseparable. This leads to more explanations on imagination, involving many features that are also used for describing both, creativity and improvising.

Imagination has an essential part in the creative process, they are identical. Without imagination there is no music born to me. I need the imagination and the imagination means that I give freedom to my thoughts, that I don't direct them, I give them freedom to move where they move. Like Teppo Repo said, that he plays imaginations. It's well said. There is the improvisation, and it is the same thing as imagination. (Musician 2)

Teppo Repo (1886-1962) was an Ingrian shepherd flute player who was famous for improvising and playing "*omasta päästä*" (from one's own head) (Joutsenlahti 2018, p. 29). This example describes well not only the unity of imagination and creativity, but also the integrity of imagination and improvising. Improvisation is seen here as a hearable or playable form of imagination - to improvise, it means to play imagination.

Several parallels were drawn between imagination and moving, for example imagination was described as a path or a way for travelling.

Imagination is travelling to places which you wouldn't be able to reach in the real world. Imagination is a possibility, it enables to make up such things, which originally can seem impossible. It is not planned. If I follow a plan, something I need to do, then if there is no imagination involved, then the result is different from if I had given permission to imagination. Then it opens such possibilities, which the rational mind cannot open, which the logic thinking does not provide. (Musician 2)

The metaphor of travelling is similar to Bertinetto's (2013) view about imagination as a vehicle for creativity. According to that, imagination creates the path that the process of art production follows (Bertinetto 2013, pp. 71–74). In the context of this

research, I find the travelling metaphor in improvisation important because it brings in the dimension of time. As Bertinetto discusses, also imagination involves time, it develops in and through time (ibid., p. 71). From that view, the path that imagination creates, is not there before improvisation. It only exists with the improvisation, emerging at the same time as improvisation and having freedom to lead anywhere. Freedom is also one of the values connected to the ancient style of *kantele* improvisation, which I will open up in the next subchapter.

## 4.2 Values in ancient *kantele* improvisation

When the interviewees described their experience on using imagination in improvisation, they brought out multiple values that it carries for them. They all used various ways of describing their experiences, but nevertheless, several values were commonly emphasised by the participants. First, all the interviewees mentioned the importance of freedom.

It means freedom, freedom of thoughts, that thoughts can flow freely. This is imagination. [...] I experience it as a big freedom from all restrictions and rules, you get rid of them and I'm perfectly free in this world, in my own imaginary world, I am free from bounds. (Musician 2)

I think when I'm in a good place with my moods, then, I think, I feel so free. So, when I play, I can also see that there are no borders or expectation, where the music should go or what kind of tune it should be. It's, I think, the freedom that the imagination makes, that leads my playing. And makes it more open for the moment. (Musician 4)

The feeling of freedom seemed to be the main value for the participants in their experience of improvising. Moreover, it seems to be connected with other values mentioned. The second value mentioned by the participants of the research, is the aspect of a bodily experience. All the interviewees brought out that in the creative process of improvising, the bodily movement creates the improvisation, and the mind does not participate in leading the music. This was also one of the main reasons to experience the feeling of freedom.

And you might find yourself in a place that you really don't know what to do next. And that can be wonderful, I think. It is connected to this, Karelian playing, because it comes back to this finger positions and these techniques, that there is some kind of safeguard. You can play, you can do whatever, but that's also something you can go back [to]. And it's in your body, it's your finger positions, it's physical movement. (Musician 3)

But I'm really improvising just using this technique. And it just goes and goes. [...] But then, I think it's difficult to say what I'm thinking or experiencing because sometimes it can be very blank state. Nothing in that sense, [...] I am in the moment or in the music, so amazingly present. I didn't think anything. (Musician 4)

The bodily experience of freedom is directly connected with the ancient *kantele* playing technique and improvising one's 'own power'. As described by Kastinen (2021, p. 6), when the playing technique is automatized, then it takes care of the instrument and "transforms the musicians inside journey into a musical soundscape, giving its way to the subconscious". I see the aspect of physical playing technique as one of the most important characteristics of the ancient style of *kantele* improvisation, as it leads to freedom of both, mind and body and also describes the music itself as having the main role in an improvisation.

It's closer to the idea of music playing the musician rather than musician playing the instrument. It's the music that makes the decisions. The player [...] gives the leading to music and does not try to be themselves the one who gives directions, the person surrenders to the music. And they do not plan what they are doing, but just rest in the music and music makes the decisions. (Musician 2)

The third important value of ancient style of improvisation, that all interviewees mentioned, was a non-judgemental way of thinking. This connects well with the idea of the player surrendering to music and being apart from the conscious mind.

There is no judgment. Because when I play, I very often judge what I do, it should be better, like, this wasn't good enough, let's try this again. But when

I'm improvising and enjoying it, then it's not. There are no mistakes or that thing. It might be like, Oh, that was nice. I will do it again. (Musician 4)

Improvisations are different, but in the value, there is no difference, they have completely same value. One can never estimate this music in that sense, the meaning is only there, what the music gives to the player themselves. What is the music's value for the player? If the player gets into the situation where they enjoy making music, if it is joy and enjoyment, then one has got to the point. (Musician 2)

The values brought out in this research were to sum up the individual experiences that the interviewees described. All of them are connected to each other, leading to each other of following to each other and their borders are not always clear. Nevertheless, these three values brought out in this research, feeling of freedom, bodily experience and non-judgemental thinking help to understand the main essence of the ancient style of *kantele* improvisation and apply it to different contexts. In the next subchapter, I will present the findings about using imagination in improvisation in a pedagogical context.

### **4.3 Imagination and pedagogy**

The data analysis revealed that in a music teaching situation, imagination and improvising were practised together and it was a fruitful way for starting to learn an instrument. All interviewees had used imagination when teaching music, for example, Musician 1 explains:

For me music is a tool for communicating, so I always take imagination before [musical] notes, because with music you can tell things that you don't have even words for. So that's the main tool for my students to start to get know the instrument and music itself, so that the first step.

I think it might open up something in the students, like, that you can also compose yourself, you can use your, imagination when you are playing. And it's not just notes and right finger order, or right notes and rhythm. But it's something more, like stories or feelings. (Musician 4)

Using imagination in teaching helps the student to connect with the music on a more personal level, create meaning for the student. Through becoming personal, it raises also motivation for learning and practising. The student can feel, how their opinions and views matter and can be part of music. Also, if material is more personal, then the student takes more responsibility for the learning process. Imagination helps to create different meanings to the musical material.

They also learn self-trust and have a way of thinking, so that they can make their own music. That it would be natural, that they make music themselves. It needs to be in teaching from the beginning in order to create this way of thinking. [...] If one does not judge their music, it opens doors through which can be created great new things. Using this improvising imaginative playing breaks the locks, it gives the person many new possibilities, trust to try, trust to fail. Because it belongs to improvisation, it is all equal. [...] Not to be afraid of failure, because there are no mistakes, there are only different challenges.  
(Musician 2)

Using imagination in music lessons has, according to the interviews, long-term benefits. It affects, most of all, the student's attitude towards music and through that their whole well-being. It helps to develop creativity in making music and in addition, find courage and self-trust for creating new music and improvising.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

The task of this research was to examine the connections between imagination and the creative process of improvising. In addition to that, pedagogical aspects of using imagination in music lessons were examined. The research question – in what ways can imagination be part of the creative process of improvisation – got multiple answers in this study.

First, imagination is seen as inseparable from creativity and improvisation. To improvise, to play one's own power, means to play one's imagination and from that perspective, imagination is the essential core of improvising. Second, imagination is closely connected with various values that improvising has for the participants – the freedom of body and mind and non-judgemental thinking. Imagination is there in the improvisation through these values and at the same time carrying its essential quality of freedom. Third, using imagination in music lessons has long-term benefits for the students. It helps the students to find a personal relationship with the music, develop creativity and trust in themselves.

Based on this study, using imagination is a fruitful way of growing students' well-being in education. I suggest that qualities like raise of motivation, self-trust and creativity are significant not only on students' personal level but could have a wider impact in the society. As Hill (2012) described the idea of cultural ideologies affecting creative activities in music, the effect could also be in the direction from music lessons to society. Bringing more imagination to music education and through that to education in general, can lead the way to a more open and tolerant society. Also, as Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) discussed, improvisation might be a way of placing musical imagination at the centre of the educational process and help students to develop their social agency.

As this research was done in a smaller scale, it could be used as an introduction for the topic of using imagination and improvising in educational practises. Nonetheless, the impact of using imagination and improvising in music lessons could be seen in a wider social and cultural context. I suggest for further research to examine this topic in a more extensive scale and in a wider context of the society. The topic of improvising and using imagination in lessons could also be more broadly introduced

in the teachers' education to encourage future and present teachers to use more creativity in their pedagogical practise.

The wider social impact for using imagination in music lessons could start from the education system and first of all, from music education. This research focused on improvisation in the context of the ancient *kantele* playing style, but as mentioned above, this style of improvising seems to be a way of thinking and is not supposed to be practised only on *kanteles*. I feel that this way of improvising is not limited with instrumentation and not only is applicable to other instruments, but also to other fields in the education system. Using imagination in the teaching and learning processes and applying such values as freedom, equality and non-judgemental thinking could contribute into a better well-being in both, personal and societal level.



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# Appendix

## Appendix 1 (Interview guide)

First, I will tell the interviewee the topic of my research and also the research task and question. I will make it clear, that the data will only be used by me and no personal information about the interviewee will be mentioned.

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your relation to the ancient *kantele* improvisation practise?
  - 1.1 What is your improvisation process like? When and how do you improvise?
  - 1.2 How would you describe your improvisations?
2. What kind of imagination is involved when you improvise?
  - 2.1 How would you describe imagination? Which adjectives would you use?
  - 2.2 How would you describe the role of imagination in improvising?
3. What is the role of imagination in your creative process of improvising?
  - 3.1 How does imagination affect your musical choices when improvising?
  - 3.2 How does it affect the frame/organising the musical performance?
  - 3.3 How does it affect the content of the improvisation?
4. What is for you your 'own power' (*oma mahti*) when you play?
  - 4.1 Could you describe any experience of playing your own power?
  - 4.2 What is the value of improvisation for you?
  - 4.3 Which new info has imagination given you while improvising?
5. Have you used imagination in teaching improvising? If yes, then how?
  - 5.1 What could be the advantage of using imagination in teaching?

In the end I ask if there was anything that I did not ask, but they would like to add. With that I give the opportunity to the interviewee to make end remarks and talk freely as it is not an answer to any specific question. I also make sure they know how to contact me if they have some questions or further thoughts about the research.