

THE RICHNESS OF REASONS TO IMPROVISE

*Finding balance between the technical and artistic aspects
in the practice and pedagogy of vocal group improvisation*



Research Collective, Kapsäkki, April 2018, photo Jari Flinck

Merja Rajala

Nordic Master of Global Music
Sibelius Academy, 2018
University of the Arts Helsinki

INDEX

1. INTRODUCTION: MOVING BEYOND MY IMPROVISATIONAL BOX	3
1.1 FRAMING THE MASTER'S PROJECT	6
2. THE METHODS AND APPROACHES USED IN MY PROJECT	7
2.1.VOCAL PAINTING	7
2.2 CIRCLESONGS: THE METHOD	9
2.3 VOCAL RIVER.....	10
2.4 PHYSICAL CONNECTION.....	11
2.5 STATUS IN IMPROVISATION HIERARCHY.	12
2.6 CONCERT DESIGN.....	13
3. THE PROCESS	14
3.1 THE RESEARCH COLLECTIVE PLATFORM	14
3.1.1 <i>Research Collective phase I: The basics</i>	15
3.1.2 <i>Research Collective, phase II: Towards artistic content</i>	18
3.2 THE CHORAL PLATFORM	20
4. REORGANISING THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF THE APPROACHES.....	23
4.1 THE SOURCES: BRAIN, BODY, SENSES, SUBCONSCIOUS AND EMOTIONS	23
4.2 THE SINGERS ROLE IN IMPROVISING	24
4.3 COMMUNICATION	26
5. PEDAGOGICAL AND ARTISTIC REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS.....	27
5.1 BALANCING TECHNICAL AND ARTISTIC APPROACHES TO IMPROVISATION	27
5.2 LEARNING A MULTITUDE OF SKILLS THROUGH IMPROVISATION	28
6. CONCLUSION.....	32
6.1 THE BOX OF FREEDOM	32
6.2 TRYING TO REACH HONESTY	33
6.3 LISTENING FROM A NEW PLACE	34
7. REFERENCES.....	35

1. INTRODUCTION: Moving beyond my improvisational box

I did not really remember my childhood game until one day in this research we were exploring memories to be used as a source for vocal improvising. While working with the exercise, I recalled how I as a kid used to imagine that I was a tiny, less than one-inch tall girl, living in a matchbox. I loved spending time just sitting in The Box, the closet of the kindergarten. In my imaginary world, I did all the kinds of adventures to the world outside, struggling my way across the giant room and furniture, avoiding gigantic humans.

In the following video of improvised moment, I used that memory as a source for a song: [Video of the improvised song](https://youtu.be/soC3YlMTj_M)
(available in https://youtu.be/soC3YlMTj_M)

*There's a box
You have the roof, touching your hair,
You have the roof, touching your hair
Cause you're so tiny in the box*

*There's a box
You have the walls, touching your hands
You have the walls, touching your hands
Cause you're so tiny in the box*

*There's a box
You have the floor, touching your feet
You have the floor, touching your feet
Cause you're so tiny in the box*

*So tiny, tiny, tiny
With sparkling sounds, sparkling colours
With sparkling - all the colours in the world - in the Box*

*It's a secret place for you to be in - the box
You're in secret place to be in this - tiny box
And you know it, because you're four,
You're four years old, in the closet, in your kindergarten,
there's a box,
that tiny secret box.*

*I draw it to you...
I draw it to you...
A secret box
A secret box
Shhh..*

(transcription of improvised song, Research Collective, December 2017)

I understand this memory as a metaphor for this research.

I believe that as humans we are always somehow framed with the aesthetics we have experienced and what we have learned in the past. We tend to approach the world from certain starting points; we speak certain musical languages as mother tongue; we prefer using more some of our senses or we like to analyse and structure things in a certain way. In my process, I have looked into my present values framing my way of understanding improvisation and explored and expanded “the outside world” in my improvisational imagination.

In order to understand my approach to this journey, it feels important to first share my own understandings of improvisation and journey becoming an improviser.

My first education as a pop & jazz voice teacher, Helsinki Pop&Jazz Conservatory (1995-1999) lead me to study and to teach vocal improvising based on jazzy aesthetics. On the other words focusing on mastering the scales that would illustrate the chord changes of the song expressing harmony, creating rhythmic and harmonic tensions and releases, communicating with other soloists, reforming material the other one had produced and getting inspired of ideas from what other players were playing. As my voice teacher studies included a set of certain styles I had to learn, I also became aware of other styles, where the improvisation was more abstemious and could be heard in the way singer makes melodic or rhythmic variations to the theme of the song.

My interest in Cuban music and choral work took me to study in Instituto de Artes Cuba, In 2004 and 2005 where I then learned that vocal improvisation could also be about verbal interaction in a situation delivering a message (also political) or just playing around a story. The focus for a singers’ solo, pregon, was not in melodic expression, but in the lyrics and communication. On the contrary to what I had learned before, the notes and rhythms followed the message. Later during my Classical music choir conductor studies in Finland (BA 2013), I was able to add some insights to the concept of improvisation in classical music aesthetics, many enough to understand its existence. In addition, working in theatre projects for more than 15 years, has given me some basic understanding in the theatre improvisation, presence, communicating and reacting.

During my Sibelius Academy’s Global Music masters studies (2014-2018), I started to realise how my own improvisational history was quite much a “product” of Finnish music education with it’s pedagogical traditions and selection of western styles of music. I was shocked to realise that there were still whole continents with wide and rich musical traditions that have been ignored in my previous education. I also became more aware of longer historic timelines in the aesthetics of improvising. Attending Sibelius Academy’s folk music department’s Master Academy course (2016-2017) opened a new path of finding physical impulses and reasons for improvising. All these Sibelius Academy’s studies liberated me to celebrate the diversity in the styles and the functions of the music and made me to want to open my eyes for the variety of expressional possibilities and reasons.

Concurrently finishing my Vocal Leadership MuM, Royal Academy of Music, Denmark (2015 - 2016), I found my identity as a choral improviser; how I had always been inventing vocal music, either as a writer by my desk or a singer in a group. I saw that I had for a long time used improvising as a pedagogical tool making up voice parts to sing to help the singers to feel the music better. I had never realised that the thing I already did could be called as choral improvising. During these studies, I learned the Vocal Painting method to choir improvisation by Jim Daus Hjernøe and got to work a little bit with Roger Treece, a Circle Singing improviser and Rhiannon, vocal improvisation teacher. All these people influenced the methods and approaches of this thesis.

My rationale for this project grew out of my desire to move beyond my improvisational box. As I look back to my own voice teacher and choir conducting education and examine teaching and the curriculums that are written, I can see one common factor: The emphasis in music tuition has much more been on the mechanic/technical side of music than the artistic content and purposes of expression. In my opinion, our western culture is based on measuring, evaluating life through mechanical understanding. Nothing is true before proven by measuring it with equipment. Finland has been striving to build our society to be one of the leading information societies in the world. Information is limited to rational information and studying is seen as equal to receiving information – rational understanding. My experience has been that music conducting education has also been built on these values on many occasions. Teaching has been focused on technical side and the singers have been assumed to bring the artistic content into the process without giving any guidance or inspiration. However, I disagree. In my opinion, musicians are artisans whose profession should not be taught purely intellectually. I feel that in improvisation, there is no riddle of which came first the chicken or the egg. We should see the techniques as a structural explanation on how the art appears to happen, not as the art itself. As artists, conductors, and pedagogues, we should also be able to transmit information of the other kind. By this I mean that we should try to reach the core in music, emotional connection, perceiving the world, transmitting energy, or any true reason we feel music is about. I think we need to learn how to support the singers also in their artistic expression and creative connection to themselves.

In this master's project, I wanted to deepen my understanding of the techniques, tools and know-how in vocal group improvising and then see if I could get past the technical emphasis often placed in the teaching of vocal improvisation. I chose improvisational aspects with different qualities, hoping to be able to use them as a "richness of reasons to improvise" both in my artistic and pedagogical work.

1.1 Framing the master's project

The central objective of this master's project is to use research to discover new artistic and pedagogical tools to collective vocal improvisation with groups with different backgrounds.

The final project is comprised of two parts:

1. **A one hour improvised final concert, *Waiting to hear it*** (Helsinki Music Centre, May 2018) showcasing the artistic outcomes of this research. The final concert is guided by these sub questions:
 - How can I present collective vocal improvisation in a way that satisfies me artistically?
 - How can the pedagogical outcomes and the values of the process be expressed artistically on the stage?
 - How can I use improvisation methods to facilitate collective composition processes presented in the concert?

2. **This reflective text** in which I present the project and summarise my pedagogical and artistic growth in the process. As such, this text is guided by the following sub questions:
 - How does my understanding of and teaching of choral improvisation expand through the process of applying a variety of improvisation methods and tools in various choral settings?
 - How can applying a variety of improvisation methods and tools in different choral settings help me to find balance between technical and artistic aspects of improvisation in my teaching and artistic practice?
 - What additional skills can be taught through choral improvisation?

Writing this reflective text was done in parallel with planning the concert.

2. THE METHODS AND APPROACHES USED IN MY PROJECT

In this section, I introduce the methods and approaches to improvisation that I explored both artistically and pedagogically through this master's project. These include Vocal Painting, Roger Treece's book *Circle Song – the method* (2015), Rhiannon's *Vocal River* (2013) improvising book with exercise cards and separate approaches detached from bigger contexts of dance improvisation, status expression and concert design.

2.1. Vocal Painting

Vocal Painting (henceforth VOPA) is an extensive collection of interactive hand signals developed by professor Jim Daus Hjernøe (DK). This sign language is used to communicate non-verbally between the conductor and singers to create improvisational vocal art. The method could be seen as a vocal evolution of Soundpainting – Walter Thomson's multidisciplinary live composing sign language for musicians, actors, dancers, and visual artists. According to the Soundpainting online homepage (retrieved april 2018),

the language comprises more than 1500 gestures that are signed by the Soundpainter (composer) to indicate the type of material desired of the performers. The creation of the composition is realized, by the Soundpainter, through the parameters of each set of signed gestures.

Vocal Painting method will be published in a digital application in 30.8.2018. My knowledge of the method is based on being professor Daus Hjernøes student during Vocal Leadership Master studies in Royal Academy of Music, Aalborg (2015-2016).

Basic Principals of Vocal Painting

In improvisation, the singers are placed in front of the conductor to voice parts in piano like settings, lowest voice to the left and the highest to the right. The conductor live composes or arranges music of the material that the singers are improvising according to the leader's wish in real time. VOPA conductor communicates with the choir using hand signs indicating specific type of musical material to be performed by the singers. The signs can be shown for any number of singers from one to the whole choir and are always gestured in the order: who, what, when. The conductor could, for example, sign one singer (who) to create an ostinato (what) enter slowly (when), a group of singers (who) to copy that (what) now (when) and the whole choir (who) to change the sound (what) on conductor's mark (when). According to Hjernøe,

VOPA is used to communicate non-verbally between conductor and singers to create improvisational vocal art. The system offers an advanced set of tools to lend shape and structure to the music of the moment. (Hjernøe, private communication, 6.4.2018)

Though the conductor gives the initiatives and definitions of the functions wanted to the music, the artistic content is up to the singers who use their own musical taste to invent the best possible content or solution to the music of the moment.

To understand the interaction between the singers and the conductor, Hjernøe has published a video demonstration of his work with RAMA singers [which can be watched in here](https://vimeo.com/261855312/991abe36eb).
(available at <https://vimeo.com/261855312/991abe36eb>)

Vocal Painting could be practiced and used in a choir for both pedagogical (learning skills) and artistic (performing) aims, depending on what it is in the choir's interest. While becoming able to improvise, the choir will get into a process of learning music making skills. Hjernøe expresses this process as The Intelligent Choir concept. According to Hjernøe, VOPA signs could also be "used within traditional repertoire to convey details during rehearsals and live in concert". By using the VOPA signs a conductor is able to communicate qualities that are not possible within the traditional choir conducting techniques for example the amount of air used in the sound.

My interest in the method in this master's project is focused on implementing new aspects to teaching and using VOPA. Although Vocal Painting signs consist of 75 signs (at the time of writing), in my research I taught the groups only approximately 20 - 30 signs. I chose the signs most commonly used, signs connected to very basic elements of music, leaving out all the extended expressions and signs that require more knowledge of theoretic music base. For the reader to understand the process better, I will introduce the signs I used in this research by name:

Movement:	Basic step 1,2,3,4, Clap, Walk around,
Sound:	Energize, Externalize (voice / reset), Volume (fade in / out), Develop / create Solo / finish solo, Harmonize (up/down) Vowels, Air, Melody (easy to copy), Synchronize, Drone, Beat / beatboxing, Pitch up / down, Speak
Phrasing:	Ghostnotes filter, Legato, Staccato Subdivisions Fermata, Glissando, Break, Record,
General	Continue, This is, Tempo, Off / mute Body, With, Relate to, Change, Lyrics Prepare, Enter slowly,
Who:	You, All performers,

2.2 CircleSongs: The Method

When talking about circle singing, we need to acknowledge an American singer and improviser Bobby McFerrin as the father of this style of a solo singer improvising with choirs. In this aesthetics, only one person improvises the music using a group of singers as a living instrument, discovering ostinatos, repeating patterns to be given out for choir voice parts and then bringing the parts in and out. The choir is like a living looper, a pedal machine where you can record any ostinato and then push the pedal to switch it on and off.

In my master's project, I studied Roger Treece's approach to circle singing in his book *Circle Songs – The method* (2015). His guidebook to circle singing leadership comes with two CDs and one loop track CD. I used a digital version of the book, and received it directly from Treece, before it was published.

It is very clear that Roger Treece is very much influenced by his experience in McFerrin's improvising vocal group, Voicestra. For me Treece's approach appeared both mathematical and architectural, teaching basic technique of creating loops really clearly. In the book, Treece introduces five components of music: motor, anchor, motif, melody and harmony to build the loops to facilitate circle singing. Treece introduces also an architectural aspect under the title "music by design," as reference for how to place and use those five elements and their variations.

I find Treece's concept of building blocks very practical and useful for building up arranger mind set; the same technical tools could easily be used in any composing or arranging tuition. This is where I can relate to Treece as an improviser. In the method itself, however, I question the limitations to looping and slow changes in the music created. In his book, Treece has focused on giving technical structure to circle songs, leaving out the emotional or physical aspects in improvisation (other than being clear of the pulse) which might make his approach too mathematical for some readers. Treece gives very clear and helpful instructions on pointing out the keys to successful communication with the choir in improvisational moments. The definitive pearl in his book is the artistic receipt for the circle singing process to invent music and loops: exploration, discovery and definition. Treece (2015) explains,

The first step is exploration, the process of looking for an idea. You begin singing even if you don't have any idea of what you're going to sing. There are no rules, no agenda, no structure. The objective is to explore rhythms, melodic shapes, and phrases that are easy, fun, and engaging. Eventually, you make a discovery as you start to repeat and focus on an idea you found while exploring. Next, you define the idea by clarifying its rhythms and intervals. You then shape it into a repeatable idea. (p. 27)

The whole process is well described and I particularly appreciate how he stresses that the beginning of improvisation should happen through action, not thinking.

2.3 Vocal River

A Hawaii based singer and teacher Rhiannon's book, *Vocal River* (2013), is both a story of her life and a guidebook to her approach of vocal improvisation in groups. The book comes with a CD and exercise cards that I would generally describe as follows:

- Warming up – exercises, leading the singers into connection with themselves, their bodies and each other,
- Trusting the body and voice – learning personal skills in many different kinds of exercises, focusing on structural or music theory kind of understanding in singing, using stream of words, connecting the voice into the body presence, and
- Small ensemble practise – putting the skills to bigger context in a group.

Rhiannon's book represents a holistic approach to group improvisation by giving insights also to artistic expression, connecting improvised singing to subconscious impulses and to the body, along with technical guidelines. The book gives inspiration on many different fields, for example how to work with lyrics, gibberish and nonsense. I especially liked the balance in offering technical skills and artistic expression exercises. In her book, she addresses the question of "how to build music skills without getting caught in the perfection spiral" (Rhiannon, 2013, p. 32), a question I think as a key for balancing the tuition. Rhiannon is leading the reader to find the connection between the mind and the body and to stay in delicate connection with yourself and the others while improvising. She says,

"all of us lead and all of us follow. No one makes choices that would shake the foundation. We want our partners to shine. Generosity is the goal. Trusting these other humans crosses all boundaries. All that is left is a fragile, powerful, potent adventure" (Rhiannon, 2013, p. 19).

Rhiannon also introduces the theme of being honest in a moment, which was totally new aspect for me and touched me quite much. A big part of my former training in improvisation never focused in the true me, but more into how to interact in the context, how to accept and use impulses outside of me, and how to create something technically relevant. In order to find this connection, she offers meditation kind of approach and bodily exercises. She (2013) states, for example, "if I am able to sing the truth of what is passing through my mind and body," (p. 65), "to let myself empty and wait" (p. 7), and "Moment to moment is all there is: following one breath, one note, one idea at the time" (preface).

Like Treece, Rhiannon also has a long career as a singer in McFerrin in Voicestra. plainly inheriting improvisation concepts from him, such as motor-interlocking, a repetitive starting pattern rhythmically interlocking with another pattern. Although Rhiannons uses the same phenomena, motor-interlocking, as Treece, her approach to it is in a slightly different context; it is more open and not restricted only to sustaining loop. In her thinking, motor and interlocking can be

perceived more like musical functions which gives more room to the music to vary and flow and change.

2.4 Physical connection

At the Sibelius Academy's Master Academy course 2016-2017, I had the opportunity to learn different ways of using impulses as a source for improvising in the guidance of singer Outi Pulkkinen. As a part of her doctoral work, *Runolaulusta kokonaisvaltaiseen improvisointiin* (2014) Pulkkinen had researched holistic improvisation. From a wide range of exercises Pulkkinen had offered during the course, I selected those I felt connecting especially to the search of artistic expression in choirs. The exercises, ideology and material for researching physical connections and impulses for improvising came mostly from two sources: contact improvisation introduced me by Pulkkinen and exercises Pulkkinen had learned when working with Soile Lahdenperä (dancer, choreographer). I also shared parts of Lahdenperä's doctoral research *Muutoksen tilassa – aleksander tekniikka koreografisen prosessin osana* (2013) with my Research Collective as a philosophical reference to many exercises, for example introducing meditative exercise combined to her words

It is important for a performer to seek those personal methods which allow him/her to reach an observative and conscious state which allows him/her to be sensitive and sensing in relation to his/her actions and choices.
(chapter 4.3, translation Emmi Huttunen)

During the Master Academy studies, I had felt there was a lot of common philosophical ground in the values the contact improvisation, a form of partner dance founded in 1972, and vocal group improvisation. In contact improvisation, the dance and movements are guided by the physical touch between the dancers. The dancers are physically in contact with each other, sharing weight and momentum. Zemelema describes this in her article *what is contact improvisation* saying,

One learns to recognize and differentiate subtle impulses in our movement choices and our partner's choices. We begin to decipher the cues that we give and receive which tell us when to lead or follow, when to go up, when to go down, where to touch, how to lift, when to slow down, and when to be still. When Body, Mind, and Spirit are united in their instinctive wisdom one finds ones-self at home in every moment expressing ones true nature.
(online, retrieved, April 2018)

I especially wanted to research what kind of new understanding to musical improvisation physical training and contact improvising would give my Research Collective, becoming aware of our individual ways to react to impulses and in the sensitivity in connection between two people. I was also interested in finding out if contact improvisation exercises could be put into audible format, transformed to a vocal performance. To look into how to strengthen the individual connection

between the body and mind I chose some exercises from Soili Lahdenperä. We focused on her exercise to find and use impulses of our own body while starting to perform. In that exercise any of us went to stand in front of the others – listening what the stage of starting to perform gives to us, how does it feel, where does it feel? Further in the exercise those feelings were turned into any kind of source of expression. Pulkkinen describes the benefits of the same exercise connected to performer’s honesty:

“are you able to hear yourself, to focus in yourself though being in front of other people?” ... In my experience this helps the performer to relax in front of the audience and therefore being able to perform honestly and completely”. (Pulkkinen, 2014, p. 92, my translation)

2.5 Status in improvisation hierarchy.

Using Status in theatre improvisation was first presented by Keith Johnston in his book *Improvisation in the Theatre* (1981). The thinking behind status is based on the idea that social status expresses the amount of grandeur the person has, high status or low status, which is not based on profession or professional ranking but personal power. According to a Finnish theatre improvisation instructor Simo Routarinne (2007), status expression is formed of body language and how the voice is being used. The difference between status expression extremities low- high, can be seen in how much space they require: high status takes a lot of space, for example through prominent gestures, using volume in voice, and using the personal area of the others, and low status less, for example through shrinking the radius of movement, being quiet, getting away of the others. High status is often confused as a negative, arrogant or selfish status; however, it can also be very positive, like a good queen or mother Theresa, facilitating and taking care of the others. Both statuses are needed and have both positive and negative qualities.

In my project, I revisited Pulkkinen’s idea of status expression transformed to musicians roles. First I applied Pulkkinen’s exercise of using three levels of statuses (high, medium, low) with a soloist in vocal improvisational contexts, and made new applications of theatre status games into singing inspired by our own Research Collective member Hannu Risku’s experience. Later in the exercises, I also used the theatre improvisation cards developed by Simo Routarinne (2011), who has taken status concept training also to other communication fields, like well-being at working places. In Routarinne’s cards, one emotion corresponds each suit (fear, hate, love, joy) with four other parameters defining status expression (eyes, movement, rhythm, volume). The objective was to examine how these qualities of status expression could be transformed to musical context.

2.6 Concert design

I met Kees Kool, a singer, improvisation teacher and painter in June 2017 after a concert where I had sung in Hjernøe's vocal improvisation group at Aarhus Vocal Festival. He approached me to talk about improvisation and we instantly felt connected through our interests, not only as persons but also as he has worked intensively with McFerrin Voicestra members Joey Blake, David Worm, Roger Treece and Rhiannon. In other words, he had personally worked with both creators of two of the above mentioned methods and was willing to share his experience and passion for vocal improvisation with me.

I invited Kees to my home in December 2017 to work 2 days with the Research Collective sharing ideas and approaches to vocal improvisation, focusing on stage performance applications. Kees had been working with how to put improvisation to stage, mostly based on Rhiannon's approach, committed to bring vocal improvisation to performance for example in Rotterdam improvoices, POP-UP and Dutch Organic Choir. Kees approach in our sessions (V, VI) was in bringing in bigger scale forms, a way he approaches a full concert curve, varying the content and the amount of singers on the stage. He represented applications for different size groups with different kind of instructions, such as supporting solo (trio, soloist with two backing singers) or the way of connecting story telling to improvised song. During two days, we also went back to Rhiannon's and Treece's exercises, some of which the group had already researched a bit, and were able to experience the way he mentored the group.

3. THE PROCESS

The research process was divided into two platforms: the Research Collective platform, a vocal group of eight professional musicians, and Choral platform, including the Sibelius Academy's Global Music Program *Global Choir*, Porvoo folk high school choir *Partita* and Finnish Music Teachers female choir *Open Voice*. In this report, I am using the names of groups and people with their verbal consent.

My plan was first to work with the basic principles of the methods and my approaches to the Research Collective and then transform the selected exercises to Choral platform to be later used as a vehicle for collective composing.

3.1 The Research Collective platform

The Research Collective work took place in two phases: learning and playing around the chosen methods (February – December 2017) and developing artistic outcomes of the research (January – May 2018). In this section I first describe the selection criteria for members, followed by a detailed description of the two phases.

The criteria for the members invited was to be skilled professional musicians, sharing common values of playfulness and lot of experience in being open to communicate with other musicians. I wanted the members to represent their own unique expression, to bring different angles to the process and to share some aesthetic values of contemporary global music in order to enable the process happen within the timeline. The fact that I had worked with all except one musician before, knowing their professional interests, helped me to imagine their musical and social compatibility.

I was really blessed that all the musicians selected accepted my invitation to participate in the group. I also carried a secret wish of the group continuing working after the master's project finishes. Therefore, I considered the aesthetical background of each member, as I wanted the group to diverge artistically from my earlier experience as professional vocal group singer.

The members are presented here, with the special angle I requested them to focus extra attention on:

- Venla Blom – untraditional vocal expression
- Kasheshi Makena – kinaesthetic approach
- Vili Mustalampi – non-formally trained professional musician
- Arja Paju – pedagogical aspects, teaching via body
- Tero Pajunen – circle singing, vocal improvisation
- Merzi Rajala – facilitating, leading of the process
- Hannu Risku – improvisation theatre musician expertise
- Emma Salokoski – choir conducting

In my Research Collective platform, I chose to be a singer, an observer and a facilitator. I participated in all the research collective exercises to expand my own artistic expression and to really experience the process as a singer, not only as a leader or conductor. I did my best to throw myself into the music making and to use my artistic vision in what to research and how to present the outcomes in an artistic way in the concert.

I filmed all the work to feel free as a participant and to have a chance to observe and analyse the same situation carefully later. From the videos, I transcribed all the dialog I felt important and wrote a description of what actually happened for later analyses.

As a facilitator, I wrote all the plans for all the rehearsing days based on my own pedagogical and artistic interest. I planned the pedagogical and artistic rehearsal goals; how to present the methods, chose the exercises and the adaptations. I guided the days and lead the discussions and took care of practicalities.

3.1.1 Research Collective phase I: The basics

Phase one comprised of six inspiration day sessions, 6 - 7 hours each, planned and guided by me either in The Sibelius Academy's Music Centre Kallio-Kuninkala or in my home in Porvoo. All the days included the approach in a nutshell: warm ups, exercises representing the core of the approach, applications to the approach and innovative discussion of experience, the possibilities of taking the exercises to different contexts, ideas of new variations and the possible challenges in the tasks.

Session 1: Vocal painting

The first session took place in March 27, 2017 and focussed on Vocal Painting (VOPA). As I already had a quite long experience in working with VOPA, I mostly wanted to focus on trying out new dimensions to the existing method. The first half of the day we spent learning the basics and the limited amount of signs I had selected for our try out. The other half of the day was used for connecting the VOPA with other improvisational aspects not yet presented in the method.

I had three questions I had developed applications and exercises for:

- How would VOPA function less hierarchically in a group?
- How could the static feeling of the musical outcome be changed?
- How can I connect VOPA to other inspirational sources for improvisation such as text, picture, shape, movement?

Session 2: Vocal River

The second session took place in April 18, 2017 and focussed on Vocal River exercises. During my preparations, Rhiannon's thinking about honesty and the improvisers connection to oneself started to feel as significant and fundamental element in my research. I had not seen that kind of writing before. Therefore, I decided to choose that as a theme that would guide the group in all the

exercises during the day. Our work was guided by the question, “how to stay connected with yourself and your idea, to the music and never abandon the other singers”? (Personal Diary, private process plan).

For this, I selected 12 different exercises from her book, from different aspects. I also intentionally selected exercises that I knew would be outside my personal comfort zone, such as me guiding the meditation or connecting singing to movements. We started the day in meditative singing and exercises connecting body and voice and then moved to more clear and practical building up theoretic skills tasks, and then again to tasks where intuition and connecting between the group was in the focus. We also shared other improvisation exercises from Hannu Risku, a member of the Research Collective, that he as an experienced theatre improvisation musician felt connected to Rhiannon’s work. In all the tasks, we focused to absorb all the material through the honesty and presence, connecting body and voice.

Session 3: CircleSongs

The third session took place in May 22, 2017 and focussed on Circle Singing. I had chosen to read parts of the chapters of Treese’s book to introduce the method. Although the excerpts were carefully picked, the text was quite hard to understand, and we struggled to translate Treese’s thoughts to common language together. After understanding the content of the terms, the exercises felt really clear and useful. We worked mainly with four technical approaches to creating loops and melodies. These four themes were:

- The 5 components: Motor, Anchor, Motiv, Melody, Harmony
- Music by design: Shape, Pattern, Density, Position, Direction
- Opening the circle: Delete and Replace, Delete and Harmonise, Re-articulate, Pass the solo, Call and Response, Question and Answer
- Creating circle songs from phrase diagrams

We all found that finding a pattern by singing and not thinking, the path of exploring – discovering – defining, was a real challenge but at the same time really opening the music to come to new possibilities. As a group, we also enjoyed the richness of different ideas each member was able to generate.

Session 4: Physical connection, Status

The fourth session took place in June 7, 2017 and focussed on both Physical work and connecting status to improvisation.

I wanted the first half of the day to be focused on people’s own presence and connection with the body so we started the day with a 12-minute guided pre-recorded meditation and I introduced Lahdenperä’s thoughts of dance improvisation.

Sensibilisation of the ability to concentrate and being present is one of the foundation pillars of the performer. By concentration in connection to improvisation, I mean the ability to listen and observe the elements and

actions present in the situation. When the concentration loosens, one loses opportunities to take part in the situation. Presence communicates with others in the situation. For me, it is the opposite of being withdrawn.
(Lahdenperä, 2013, chapter 4.3, translation Emmi Huttunen)

After orientation indoors, we went outside to my garden to continue with bodily exercises. The outdoor exercises were meant as warm-ups, to form the bases for later improvisation. We searched out personal manners of reacting to impulses and moved towards contact improvisation duo exercises. We also played a bit of football to be later used as postponed physical memory for improvisation.

Anchoring the day to the body awareness exercises, we continued with Lahdenperä's stepping in front of the others exercise and created some duo applications of that including the aspect of connecting – disconnecting. In Lahdenperä's exercise one at the time steps in front of the others, searches his/her own inner reaction in that moment and uses that as a source for improvising. We also worked with the theme of choosing when to react to an impulse in improvisation, inhibition in a form of a game I had created. The groups also tried improvising on the bases of the postponed memory of the football game we had played in the morning for group improvisation. At the end of the day, we had a chance to do some basic exercises of status roles and tried out Pulkkinen's status role applications for musicians' roles as an introduction for later research.

Sessions 5 and 6, Inspiration from stage applications and theatre

Sessions number five and six took place in December 18 and 19, 2017 and focussed on searching forms to performance. Kool presented individual exercises that could be connected to a full performance as they have structured it in his Rotterdam Group. As Kool shared much of the common ground with Rhiannon, many of the bases to the ideas he brought to the table felt already comfortable to us based on our previous session 2. This enabled us to manage a 40-minute improvised run through with him guiding us through the process at the end of the two-day session. He also presented a form he had developed for pre-producing material for improvised moments by writing. That idea I later applied for a group task to write lyrics in the choral composing process.

I admired Kools very warm and friendly way of guiding the process's reflective discussion. He used great questions like "What does the music need?" to guide the process. We were truly thankful for his generosity in sharing and exchanging exercises. Personally, I appreciated especially the exercises where the musical function in singing was not defined, but only the common direction and connection between the singers.

In addition to the work led by Kools, on the second day we also returned to the topic of Status Expression to share something with Kool in exchange. As we already had worked with Pulkkinen's idea of connecting status to improvisation hierarchy during session IV, we now deepened our understanding of the

phenomena in the guidance of Hannu Risku, a member of the Research Collective who is an expert in this area. Risku took the group first to examine low and high status behaviour via fun and concrete exercises. In addition to Risku's exercises, we also made our own musical applications based on this and the previous work we had done. For example, we used Pulkkinen's idea of applying high, medium, and low status to improvisers' musical behaviour, but decided to change the musicians status while improvising. We also took Routarinne cards (2011) under examination, searching how to define musical functions corresponding the parameters in the cards.

3.1.2 Research Collective, phase II: Towards artistic content

In the second phase, The Research Collective work aimed to deepen the understanding of approaches, to develop the group's ways in artistic expression and to search an artistic way of representing the process. At phase II the Research Collective moved towards even more collaborative way of working, with me as the facilitator and artistic director. I chose and proposed the content and the artistic guidelines of the *Waiting to hear it* concert, based on what we had experienced and learned. I also searched my artistic vision of the visual side of the concert, which was connected not only to light engineering but to how the musicians move and perform on stage. To open the process for the audience, I made a choice of us writing poems of the elements and values that had become important to me during the process. At the time of writing, phase two was still in progress as we worked to prepare for the final concert. In the text below, I have provided short descriptions of the rehearsals that had already taken place, and a brief outline of those to come.

Session VII: February 26, 2018

While preparing for phase two, I had picked 20 of my favourite video excerpts of loops created during phase one. During the session, I asked the group to vote three of them to be used as material for collective composing. Later the day, the Collective discussed and tried out approaches to composing in collective improvising settings. The group also worked to create own applications of the "supporting solo" exercise learned from Kool.

Session VIII: March 5, 2018

I presented the approaches I had selected to the concert and made into artistic forms for the group. Research Collective worked with my suggestions for applications based on different exercises, modifying and suggesting different forms. We also continued with collective composing experiments.

Session VIII, April 6, 2018

To make artistic decisions and to have common artistic goals, the group discussed the values for the concert. I represented the themes that had become important to me in the process: honesty, being truthfull in a moment and using a variety of impulses to improvise. I also wanted to discuss the feeling of the pressure to start to entertain while being watched – for us to be aware of its

possible effect to our concert design. I also described how I see Research Collective learning curve at this point, after watching more than 45 hours of video material of our previous sessions. We also worked with a transcription I had written of our collective composing sessions, Emma Salokoski's amazing solo "Tarina lapsen pakottamisesta" the group work based on material chosen in session VI.

Session X, April 20, 2018

A run through session with the whole group and Kees Kool as a visitor. The group felt first a bit tense and worried of the concert to come. We focused on remembering the concert design I had suggested. In the beginning I struggled a bit trusting the process and my vision of it, because of having an extra member joined the group. I learned to trust our own process and skills, appreciating all the inputs from Kees.

Session XI, April 21, 2018

First try-out gig at Kapsäkki music-theatre, Helsinki. Research Collective improvised in a true, honest and relaxed way a 55-minute concert, using bodily impulses, visual inspiration, stories, contact improvisation and some structural ideas. We also improvised with Emma Salokoski choir. We all felt sharing and experiencing something new and special for us on stage.



photo Jari Flinck, Research Collective, Kapsäkki 21.4.2018, "Contact impro duet"

Sessions XII - XIII, April - May, 2018

At the time of writing, two sessions were yet to come. These are planned for April 30 and May 11.2018. During those sessions I plan to finalize the concert design in a way that makes us feel comfortable on stage and rehearse my final arrangement of the groups' collective composition "Tarina lapsen pakottamisesta".

3.2 The Choral Platform

In this section I will give a brief overall description of the processes that took place with three choirs, to help the reader understand my pedagogical reflections in chapter 4 and 5.

My main approach was first to bring selected exercises and approaches from my Research Collective platform to the choir, to teach skills I would later want to use in improvised composing processes. The improvisation process with three of my own choirs, aiming to the outcome of collective composition, took place in Helsinki, Espoo and Porvoo during spring 2018. Each choir worked in different time line settings, as Sibelius academy *Global Choir* worked with the process weekly throughout the semester (40 hours), *Open Voice*, Finnish Music Teachers female choir, worked 4 whole days (in total 24 hours) and *Partita Choir*, Porvoo Community College mixed choir, only two rehearsals (6 hours). The collective composing process materials were video recorded, I also kept a short choir diary of the 3 different processes. At the time of writing the processes are still waiting to be finished, as the outcomes of collective composing project is to be seen at Music house concert 12.5.2018

From my previous experience as a choral conductor, I knew that when working with improvisation the leader should be very sensitive for the singers' psychological ability or limitations of expressing themselves. The cornerstones are building safe, playful and non-judgemental atmosphere, reducing the fear of failure. I have found that connection and trust between the singers and connection to your own body and mind are in the core of improvising tuition. In my research on choral platform a lot of this work was build on warm-ups, ice breakers and game type exercises. Some of the trust and connection was also build before the actual master's project as the choirs had already worked with me and each other at least one semester before. With *Partita Choir* I was able to throw in a fast process because of a years long common path with the singers.

To teach improvising skills, I chose exercises from all of the methods I had studied in Research Collective platform and tried to adjust them to match choir singers skills. I formed the material and exercises before taking them to the choirs in a way that most of the exercises became a combination of my 23 years of experience in choir conducting, arranging and composing, my musical life, previous studies and what I had learned in during the master's project so far. Some exercise applications got their final form while working with the choir.

I began the learning curve with more "mechanic" approaches, like Treece's motor-interlocking exercises, and slowly moved towards connecting the body, the intuition or abstract factors to the improvising. By this I tried to scale the difficulty level of the exercises, both technical and mental, to correspond to the on going process and time limitations. In other words, I chose to limit the elements used in improvisation exercises to create safety and clear tasks - first playing with quite simple rules in a smaller box before opening up the whole universe of improvising with only some general instructions.

I tried facilitating the collective composing process in several ways choosing many different approaches from me leading and giving guiding questions. One way was to give tasks for smaller 4 – 6 singer groups to create parts or core elements of the composing, to create compositional skeletons for later collective work. To this task I implemented Treece’s motor – interlocking concept, some of Kees questions for memories applied into lyric writing and my experience as a song writing teacher during 2007-2009.

Another way was to lead the process with the whole group for example by conducting a collective improvising process by Hjernøe’s VOPA signs and my own verbal instructions. In that communication I used terms from Treece and Rhiannon I had taught before or also asked questions like “could you create a sang form of this poem to your mother tongue” or “what kind of long chords do you hear here”. We created music phase by phase, stopping to document what we liked to keep, and then continued improvising.

Sometimes I picked smaller groups to sing creative tasks in front of the others and the ones watching were given the power to make the parts they like stronger by joining or harmonising the parts. When the smaller group had come to an interesting result in my or choirs opinion, they also taught their parts to the rest of the singers, and the whole choir got involved in the process to be continued from there. I tried two approaches to having lyrics in the song, ready made lyrics and lyrics made by the group. For chorists writing their own lyrics I gave a list of questions to inspire the content. Some of the lyric lines could come up during improvisation and sometimes a singer also had come up with an idea of a line between the rehearsals, which we then used.

This following poem got composed in the process by Global Choir and will be performed *in Waiting to hear* concert 12.5.18 by the group.

*later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?*

*it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.*

(Warsan Shire, 2011)

I video recorded all the compositional working phases the choir had liked and chose the material to be saved and used for the future song. I also planned the next steps and made transcriptions of the material as skeleton sheets of previous outcomes with new tasks for the singers. For some missing parts, I also planned other impulses for improvisation, for example by playing a chord.

I was really relentless with the idea that as much material as possible should come from the choirs. That decision combining with me taking the responsibility to document and write down the ideas made my own workload huge in the process. Because of this, in the future I will probably give more space to myself as a creative musician in the group, still using much of the material improvised and collectively created in the compositions, but in a less orthodox way.

Having more time with the Global Choir gave me the opportunity to let the collective composing process take its time. The number of skills I was able to teach in the process was really rewarding, but maybe the composing process itself felt a bit too long and loose for me. Open Voice worked really intensively, so there I had to make fast decisions on how to proceed and what moments of music to catch for later use. Because of the time we were not able to try a whole variety of options and exercises, but I focused on some more. Partita's task was very clear and short, a group task with instructions of the steps on how to make a choir theme song of 4 lines. In the discussions with the singers I had the feedback that in all the groups the experience had been educational, inspiring, empowering and it had definitely strengthened the singers' musicianship.

Everywhere
poem by Warsaw Shire Sibelius Academy Global Choir

♩ = 110

Intro

Ad libitum, freely, peacefully

Sop. *eve - ry - where* *eve - ry - where*

mezzo *eve - ry - where*

Alto *eve - ry - where*

Alto

Men

5 *eve - ry - where* *eve - ry - where* *eve - ry - where* *eve - ry - where*

10 **A tempo** *asah* *asah* *asah* *asah*

dmm dmm dmm aa dmm dmm dmm asah

dmm dmm dmm aa dmm dmm dmm asah

dmm dmm dmm aa

© Merzi Rajala & Sibelius Academy Global Choir 2018,
collective composing project

A picture of the first page of Global Choirs' collective composition: Everywhere, intro

4. REORGANISING THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF THE APPROACHES

In my process of balancing the technical and artistic, I ended up aiming to deconstruct the selected approaches and detach the exercises and written guidelines from the original methods. In this section, I have reordered the exercises and ideas based on my experiences and observations during the process into three different themes, or what I call three different sections of an improvisation toolbox. These sections are the sources used during the creative process, the singers' role in improvising and communication.

4.1 The Sources: Brain, body, senses, subconscious and emotions

I used to define vocal improvisation as reacting or choosing not to react orally to something without planning it before. My research cleared me that improvising is not only about reacting to something but very much about being in contact and dialog with that something. There is a huge difference! Reacting is a short moment, because after reacting the impulse turns off unless we stay being in contact with the impulse. Reacting can be like a monologue based on impulses, being in contact is like a dialogue with multiple or constant feed of impulses. Some kind of easiness steps into the concept of improvisation when we realize that we don't actually have to *invent* anything, but to *open up* our conscious to a dialogue with different impulses. To clarify what that something could be, I explored each of the methods asking, what to be in contact with? This led me to see the methods as a collection of five starting points, providing sources for artistic expression: brain, body, senses, subconscious and emotions.

By brain-source I mean exercises that are based on intellectual thinking. Many of them are focused on using mathematical or structural frames for improvising, such as creating loops, rhythmically interlocking parts, harmonising parts or finding a counterpoint to a phrase. Also the kind of exercises where a singer is supposed to fulfil a certain function, like bass line, I define as brain sourced improvising. Intellectual thinking also may appear when we aim for certain aesthetics, when intentionally using the knowledge of tradition we have studied.

The body, singers' connection to his/her own body or bodily interaction between singers, can be a source for many different impulses and paths in improvising. Inner feeling of own body can be a source for sounds, musical lines and rhythm. Even posture could be a source of inspiration for singing. Bodily interaction with another person can be used to get impulses and musical forms. The beauty in interaction is in the unexpected and unprepared moments, reacting to an impulse, shifting the leadership and balance between the partners. Very importantly, I noticed that body can be used as a guide in connection with our feelings; therefore it also helps the singer to stay present and honest.

Getting inspired of what you sense and making music out of that appeared in some approaches. Especially visual impulses, for example using the shapes as inspiration to melodic or rhythmic material were strongly present in my research partly because of my own interest. The shapes could, for example, be inspiration to have a correspondence in the melodic curves; they could be twisted, made into different patterns of shapes or speeds. I also used pictures to provide a lot of visual inspiration, including shapes, colours, forms or pictures of actions. Of course all the senses, kinaesthesia, sight, hearing, sense of touch, smell and taste can provide a lot of impulses to improvise from.

I believe that subconscious is actually in use every time we start improvising without planning. Subconscious flow or the trust to subconscious can also be trained actually in any exercise where you are producing an element without having time and opportunity to think about what you are going to do before you already are doing it. That could be, for example, a lyrical exercise, where you speak nouns in a steady tempo without intentionally making connection between them. Maybe subconscious is also the place where we “make choices” when we use a memory as a source for improvising, going back to something experienced and then reconstructing that in singing.

I think of emotions as a certain kind of inner energy and that is what I find most interesting in musical expression. Emotions did not really come up in any other approach than status, but obviously were connected to a lot of our work, especially when the singers’ own bodies and feelings were the source for improvising. In my experience, emotions can be used intentionally in exercises where you aim to illustrate an emotion connected to some musical element, or unintentionally while improvising just being connected to yourself. I do not recall emotions been mentioned in any other exercises than Routarinne’s status cards, where they were not actually instructed but just used as a source. I probably will need to look for more tools to guide the work with emotional impulses in theatre pedagogics.

Not all the methods included all the sources. With a quick look I could say that Vocal Painting was clearly emphasising the brain tools, Treece gave technical approaches with visual inspiration, Physical connection naturally gave lot of bodily impulses, Status expression felt partly brainy, subconscious and emotional. Rhiannons method seemed to offer the widest amount of all kinds of impulses, but leaned a lot on subconscious and kinaesthetic sources. Naturally all the methods do overlap each other, and I believe most of the time we are using several qualities simultaneously.

4.2 The singers role in improvising

When thinking what kinds of groups would benefit from the methods most, we could also look into the singers’ role and the difficulty level of the skills needed in improvising within the six approaches.

In circle singing, the choir singers do not have a creative role in improvising the music, but repeating the given material. As such, one could ask if it can be called as choir improvisation at all. Is it on the contrary conductors' improvisation? On the other hand, for a singer who has not been improvising, it can be a life changing experience getting to participate in circle singing and being part of a happening where music is invented in a moment. Although Treece's *CircleSongs: The Method* (2015) is a guidebook for a leader, the same skills could be taught also for choir singers for improvising in any settings. Using the method that way gives a lot of variation in how deep and far you wish to go with your singers with this approach.

In Vocal Painting, the singers are welcome to create and improvise elements inside the musical frames the leader is giving. The musical outcome is mostly based on repeating ostinatos which is another very dominant frame element in Vocal Painting. That makes it a kind of a safe choral box for singers to start growing in their own improvisation. Although the singers are not totally free to go wherever the music takes them, it is good to remember that creativity is also present in smaller choices the singers make and frames can create safety. In my experience, Vocal Painting is a brilliant way to help the choirs to start improvising and help a bigger group of singers to organise the music. In Vocal Painting, the leader is also able to choose what kinds of improvisational tasks are pointed to whom. That gives the conductor the opportunity to match the singers' individual abilities to the difficult level of the musical task. Vocal Painting could also be connected to Circle Singing, which enables the leader to give specific inputs to the music by singing.

Circle singing and Vocal Painting methods are great tools for a conducted improvising, where one person is more or less in charge of the form and order in the music. The methods work perfectly for big groups and or beginners and give a nice pedagogical frame for any singer. On the other hand, these methods can feel artistically too narrow and limiting, especially when working in a group of experienced musicians, and easily turn to slow down the flow. For that kind of group I suggest Vocal Painting as a shared language for anyone to generate bigger sudden contrasts (such as break, delete, energise, fermato).

Rhiannon's *Vocal River* (2013) exercises represent many angles to improvisation and are, therefore, a great collection of different level exercises for group of singers. In all the exercises the singers are the ones creating the music, due to different game rules. There are tightly framed tasks and also quite loosely framed tasks, so depending on the safety of the group the leader could scale the tasks.

Physical connection and using senses, subconscious or emotions as sources for improvisation are the most abstract approach in this project, and therefore, give most space for any kind of improvisation, without limitations. The singers are in the center of improvising, but it is good to remember that these exercises also seem to test self-confidence and trust to one's intuition the hardest. Adding more physical connection to Vocal River exercises would be a great combination.

4.3 Communication

An improvising situation could be seen as a network of connections and communicating. An improvising group needs to be fine-tuned to each other and to be able to read what is our place in the group dialogue moment by moment. Working with status exercises help to understand any communication and gives an overview of the way to use the space in improvising.

There is no feel of musical dialogue if everyone is trying to lead, to dominate the topic, and the music easily becomes fragmentary and noise like. On the contrary, if nobody in the group gives any strong initiative, the conversation does not really make much progress, and the musical outcome is more static, invariable or minimalistic. Both outcomes, energetic and noisy or static and minimalistic, can be aesthetically desired. Being aware of status, is a way for us to be aware of the effect we bring to musical dynamics. Status exercises help us to recognise the space we take or do not take in collective improvising regardless of the approach or method we come with. Playing with status makes it concrete to see the difference in musical outcomes of different combinations of statuses or maybe having only one status for all. It also helps us in becoming more flexible and seeing more options and results to our own behaviour. Like Hannu Risku from Research Collective said: "The one mastering the status is the one who is able to switch between the levels all the time" (Session VI, 19.12.2018 video).

Especially in the Choral Platform the singers gained a lot of skills and understanding on how to balance in the musical communication via this vehicle. To execute successfully different statuses in music needs quite much practise. In this also experience gives musical imagination how to take your place in hierarchy in a positive and interesting way. As status is about hierarchy in any communication, it could be applied to any of the rest of the approaches in this research. The singers also saw status exercises benefitting them not only as improvising singers, but also as arrangers and interpreters.

5. PEDAGOGICAL AND ARTISTIC REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

In this section I summarise how reorganising the character of approaches has helped me to balance between the technical and artistic approach to improvising and what kind of other skills were needed to consider teaching along with improvisation to Choral Platform.

5.1 Balancing technical and artistic approaches to improvisation

By understanding different sources that had been used inside the five different methods, I found the way to balance both technical and intuitive aspects to co-exist in my teaching or own artistic studying.

The process of taking the methods into pieces, dividing the exercises of the similar pedagogical or artistic effect (see section 4.1 above) into sources has helped me to understand how to use all of them equally. This enables me to balance my approach to improvisation. By this I mean that the technical or brain source as I call it, is not anymore the only or dominant source in approaching improvisation, but seen as one important source amongst the others. That kind of thinking diminishes the weight from the technical approach and lifts up the value of emotion, subconscious, senses and physical connection in improvising teaching.

Through this process, I have gained an understanding on how to connect a variety of inspiration for artistic expression and content. For me this means that I am able to expand my approach also to technical methods and bring more artistic values and questions into processes of teaching technics. Here I also want to underline that utilizing technical knowledge is not at all problematic for me, but using *only* brain source for creating music is. In my current opinion, intuition and emotional energy make technique into art and the intellectual approach could be seen as a tool to organise artistic content.

I would describe my process as if I had bought five cars and then taken those apart. Of those parts I can now each time build up a slightly different vehicle suitable for the situation and purpose. Absorbing, filtering and melting methods to ones' own personal artistic and pedagogical vocabulary takes time.

"There is a lot of work behind the simple"
(*Personal process diary 5.2.2018*)

In all of the groups I worked with during this project, I ended up teaching different impulse sources first separately to open up the experience and understanding of each source itself. After the singers got more comfortable with different sources, I started connecting them. In most of the cases technical tools, *brain source*, was the one connected to other sources focused on the artistic content. For example teaching first some brain source exercise, like Treece's

motor - interlocking and then how to improvise inspired of a visual source and finally combining both approaches into one new exercise. The instruction could be focusing on expressing the visual source while finding a pattern that interlocks rhythmically.

To take these sources to choirs in a most comfortable way I came to think of the exercises to take these on the scale from easy access to more difficult from the singers' perspective. In my experience, the difficulty level seemed mostly go hand in hand with the way the person naturally approached the world. Most of the singers in my groups seemed to find brain sources, intellectual and mathematic starting points, the easiest and then feel more comfortable to take steps towards expressing music connected to the body, senses, subconscious and emotional sources. Depending on the singers, the process could also happen in a different order, for example for a very kinaesthetically orientated singer, starting the improvising with bodily exercises could be the most natural way of opening the path. Being aware of the sources helps the facilitator to scale the difficulty of accessing the exercises right to different singer with different aesthetic backgrounds. If using whole methods, rather than selecting and combining various elements from each as I have done in this master's project, the leader should be aware of the emphasis in different methods which might serve some singers better than others.

The leaders' role is crucial in finding a balance between technical and artistic approaches to improvisation. The key is in how the situation is build up, what are the guiding questions, using the right amount of control from a moment to another, and choosing the tools to fit the group, the process and the energy level of the group. It is all about facilitating wisely, respecting people and being present as a person and as an active musician as well.

5.2 Learning a multitude of skills through improvisation

This master's project has highlighted a number of additional skills that singers learn through vocal improvisation. Therefore, improvisational processes could also be seen as vehicles to develop team work skills, learning music theory, ability to perceive musical structure, embodied perception of the music, learning musical elements and building blocs, listening to each other and throwing oneself on choral platform.

When I took the improvisation exercises and collective composing process plans to choirs in practise, I understood that in the Research Collective platform the Research Collective members had obviously been using a set of skills gained through their long careers as professional musicians.

I have become more aware of my Research Collective's talent and experience also in social communication, individual courage, trust, "craziness = daring to try", being able to accept/react to impulses and ability to support the others and to create something together -> work towards the same goal or to same direction. These skills are so much needed when creating together.

(Personal process diary, 9.2.2018)

This first appeared to me as unexpected problems emerged in choirs, when the singers seemed to struggle with very different challenges that I had thought of while they were following my collective composing process plan. I noticed soon that in my choral plan, where I had combined sources and exercises of the methods to a new kind of learning path, I had not considered carefully all the skills that would actually be needed. I started to analyse the unexpected hinders the choir singers had and became aware of all the other factors affecting my improvisation tuition plan. Safe environment to study the exercises the methods provide was not enough.

Teamwork

As mentioned (chapter 3.2) I gave creative tasks also for smaller groups of 4-6 people in a collective composing process in choral platform. When observing the groups working, the team work skills caught my attention. Not having a leader, made the singers struggle trying to balance with the amount of initiatives to give and the amount of space to give and take in a group. I noticed that this caused negative tension in some groups. I analysed the skills needed in my diary:

I think that it is not so much about skill level in music, but skill level in understanding co-operation, the skill of giving space and respect to others, the skill of listening and reacting in the moment, The skill of trying to make other "people look good". (Personal process diary, 5.2.2018)

I tried to help the teamwork by defining and framing the tasks in a more detailed. I named each singer of the group as a generator and facilitator of specific phase of the task, empowering the team members to decision making during the tasks. I was trying to find a way where the singers would have structure enough for their group tasks, but also enough space for creative and flexible teamwork without a specific leader. Finally I figured out that a really powerful tool to help the creative teamwork is to represent status expression and its effects on musical communication. The singers gained a lot from that approach in the mindset level.

Throwing oneself

Depending on the previous musical training or experience, almost all of the singers struggled with the basic challenge in improvising – doing something without planning it carefully first in their minds. So even though we had worked the safety and trust quite a lot and I believe the singers felt comfortable in throwing themselves into improvised music making the habit of planning first sat very tight. The order in how the things are learned to be done, also in music,

is not easy to break. Also trusting the process and how any idea can turn into something relevant comes with the experience. The more the singer was trained to interpret written material the more they struggled trusting their own instant idea. For that kind of singers I tried taking the exercises first to other art form than singing, for example, applying VOPA signs to only physical outcome, movements, without any sound. I felt that the inner expectations are not on the way of creative try outs when the exercises are taken further away to other fields of expression with less pre-learned quality control.

After getting to the state of throwing oneself to the process, all the groups in my research, choirs and Research Collective, including myself, seemed to begin the improvisational research journey with expressional hullabaloo and musical fuss. According to the professor of the Sibelius Academy's Folk Music department, Kristiina Ilmonen (personal communication, March 2018) this inevitable starting phase of trying our own limitations is necessary for us musicians, who are very much trained to be in control of everything, scales, playing technique, volume etc. What happens if I give up control? Do I dare to be crazy and ridiculous while been watched? Understanding and accepting this hullabaloo as a passing phase, helps to loosen up with the expectations of the musical results and to have the focus in the growth of expressional freedom. The singers need time and opportunity to explore their own limitations before the group is ready to step forward towards aesthetical agreements or artistic goals.

Also the skill to analyse music appeared as a skill needed in the process of applying improvising tools to collective composing. The choir singers also had hard time analysing musical outcomes or remembering and switching between short patterns they themselves had sang a moment ago. I realised that as an improviser, I am not only constantly balancing between analysing and not analysing but using a lot of ear training skills. For example, as soon as I have improvised a repeating musical function, I start to become aware of the time signature, the number of beats, subdivisions, the tonality, the pitch of my notes in tonal context and how this is related to other elements in the music. I anchor my phrase to my body, steps, movement, in other words to my kinaesthetic memory and maybe numbers to define intervals. This helps me to analyse and also remember what was created. All this that happens in seconds is a collection of skills helping the creative process but not directly connected to improvising. This led me to a conclusion that improvising tuition and especially narrow framed brain source exercises could also be used to help the singers to perceive musical structures in the mind and body, during the music making process. Also more abstract musical elements and building blocks could be learned through improvising. The improvisational guiding question "What does the music need?" could help the singers to develop the skill of observing what is going on in music, to become more aware of musical elements. Singers start to really listen to the music when they have to think as improvisers what is missing if anything? Is it a function, energy, a colour, a feeling, support, something that is opposite, framing, interaction, silence. Improvisation could be seen as a way to learn to listen to the others and the entity.

Changing between the analytical mind and throwing oneself

Being able to switch between above-mentioned intuitive and analytic mind settings appeared to be very complex core musician skill in improvising and collective composing. First throwing oneself into an intuitive creative process and then straight away approaching the outcome intellectually are both areas that require a set of skills that can be developed in improvising.

The Research Collective members seemed to gain more abstract, meta-level additional skills, whereas choir singers gained more practical level skills.

According to the Research Collective:

I have found a lot of new tools for improvising, but more importantly, I have gained a lot of confidence and routine in improvising... I also have shed a lot of my self-consciousness about improvising, and become very familiar with my own way of finding the flow. (Research Collective member, personal communication, email, February 2018)

The level of listening before I start, when I'm singing has been very important, (shortly the level of decision and listening has increased a lot). This is both when I sing my line or with a whole group. This had led me to always to think giving much to the process. (Research Collective member, personal communication, email, February 2018)

6. CONCLUSION

In this master's project, I aimed to enlarge my improvisational toolbox as an artist and a pedagogue. I have explored the frames of my own box of vocal improvising trying to find the way to get the emphasis into artistic expression - to open another richness of reasons to improvise.

I have approached this improvisation research both as an artist and as a pedagogue. As a conductor, I see myself as an artist, with people as my instrument. I see pedagogical thinking and know-how as my playing technique and, therefore, in this research I naturally have been collecting the tools to conduct improvising or any other artistic processes.

In this process my own artistry has also been strongly present not only as an artistic director and conductor but also as a Research Collective singer and vocal improviser.

As an artist, I am in a process of redefining my values in improvising and am constantly asking questions like, what do I want to express with my instrument? What are my values in improvising? How do I want to use my tools? How do I want to facilitate the improvising processes? What kind of artistic outcome I wish to present for the public and what is my relation to audience experience in performances. I have been interested in themes of freedom in expressing, connection between intuitive and intellectual, the importance and existence of energy and most of all - honesty. Methods, tools and exercises can be studied but some things are to be learned by living.

6.1 The box of freedom

In the process of learning improvising, we kind of need to throw away all the control first and then take it back in the amount that serves the artistic motives we have. We balance to limit the intuitive control free side in us to serve our goals. In my opinion our goals makes our freedom as improvisers as complicated as our freedom as humans.

The same things that seem to guide our free behaviour and communication in life guide also our musical interaction. As humans we are always dealing at least with the concepts of history, traditions (geographically and socially), culture, values and purpose. These factors already frame a lot of our inner assumptions of the improvisation, whether we are aware of those or not, and the frame gets even narrower when improvising inside a style of a musical tradition. The aesthetics do not only direct the outcome of improvisation but a lot of the whole journey of why, where and how we start and how we proceed.

Maybe the question is not whether we are free or not, but do we notice the edges of the sand box we currently play in and are we aware of the other options and possibilities to expand our own box.

My process of trying to expand the box opened a bunch of new questions like: Should the improvisers reach for maximum amount of freedom or are there other even more important values in improvising? Are all the tools learned in

this research helping us to be more free and connected to each other or are they limiting our musical creativity and expression?

In my experience all the groups, even professional, benefit from having some common ground of improvisational thinking which is such a large and wide field of aesthetics. The methods and tools used in the processes can help individuals to be more aware of the possibilities and choices they make during the improvisation. As Lahdenperä (2013) wrote, “exercises limiting yourself is also a way to build tools and force you to make new choices” (chapter 4.3, my translation).

By learning common concepts and thinking the groups can also more easily make agreements of artistic goals together. How loose those agreements can be, I do not know, but it made me wonder why is it that some improvisation moments with the same settings seem to succeed while the others are less glorious? What makes a group improvisation chaotic and what makes it magic? Is it just about fortune and favourable circumstances? What would be the smallest amount of common direction for a vocal group improvisation to appear artistically whole? What would be the loosest box we could play in and still feel we are there together? It might be just enough having the same direction for our energy.

6.2 Trying to reach honesty

For me as an artist, the most important thing learned in this process has been aiming to be totally honest while improvising. That means trying to be honest for my individual truth present and to follow the path of creating music step by step, note by note, without planning, without intellectually wishing what could happen. Being honest to the body, own energy and impulses, emotions, subconscious, to the music and also artistic choices. That is the hardest and dearest bit for me. Being honest is being absolutely true and naked, trusting that there is a step after this step in the dark. It is about taking a chance of getting lost, being weak, clumsy or ugly. It is so hard not to plan beforehand, and even harder not to go the safe “usual” way but to hear, be present and communicate with whatever there is. It is hard to give up inner judgement and accept what comes. I am looking forward to experience what happens to me and us in front of the audience. Can I be honest or do I drop back to my safety zone, my dear old box, where I know I can “improvise” well. Can I trust that the truth and honesty is interesting enough.

In a group work, I found trusting the others very empowering and liberating. When each individual knows and trusts that the others are there to support you and to help you find your notes, honesty is easier. You can speak your truth, because if there is a gap, your friends will complete your sentences. I described this in Research Collective (personal communication, 30.4.2018) using the words “I do not even improvise, I just fly”.

On the other hand, you can easily lose yourself and your truth amongst a group with a lot of contact and impulses. The key is in learning how to select the impulses to react, not all the impulses must be said yes to – although this is the first theatre improvisation rule. There are more ways to acceptance than reacting to other people's impulses. Being true in a group is about learning how to be both in contact with the others and yourself at the same time without losing your self.

6.3 Listening from a new place

Before this master's project, I already had tools for listening and improvising a scale, subdivisions, harmony, style, era and impulses from what I heard from the other players. This project, however, has made my listening grow to other senses than only ears and cognitive brain. I am getting ears to new places. Ears placed into emotions and subconscious mind of mine. I have started to learn to listen to the true feeling inside me, the dominance and power in what I do, the hierarchic effect in my expression, my body impulses, the space and silence, energy, my body, my senses and to what the music needs. All the other tools learned are subsidiary to this – although necessary.

The title of the second part of this project, my master's concert "Waiting to hear" refers to being in the moment, listening and then singing. I set the name for the concert in the very early stage of the master's project when I had the wish I would learn to wait to hear. Through this project I have found what it is I want to try to listen.

7. References

Soundpainting home page,

Retrieved from <http://www.soundpainting.com/soundpainting/>

Rhiannon, (2013) *Vocal River, The skill and spirit of improvisation*
Hawaii: Rhiannon Music

R.Treece, (2015), *Circle Song – The Method*, United States of America: Roger Treece

Outi Pulkkinen (2014) : *Runolaulusta kokonaisvaltaiseen improvisointiin.*

Retrieved: <http://ethesis.siba.fi/showrecord.php?ID=471861>

Soili Lahdenperä (2013) *Muutoksen tilassa - Alexander-tekniikka taiteellisen prosessin osana*

Retrieved: http://www.actascenica.teak.fi/lahdenpera_soile/

Routarinne, Simo (2007) *Valta ja vuorovaikutus. Statusilmaisun perusteet.*
Keuruu: Tammi.

Routarinne, Simo (2011), *status games*, pro impro Oy

Warsan Shire (2011), *Teaching my mother how to give birth.*

England: Flipped Eye Publishing limited

Moti Zelman, *What is Contact Improvisation*

retrieved: <http://www.contactimprov.com/whatiscontactimprov.html>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Sibelius Academy's Nordic Master in Global Music program for offering me unique, highly professional, creative and loving learning atmosphere.

All the singers in the choirs, for giving their creativity and voices to this project.

Research Collective for amazing journey of honesty and musical joy together.

Outi Pulkkinen, Kristiina Ilmonen and Kees Kool for guidance and discussions.

Danielle Treacy for mentoring this written reflection.