

KATHLEEN WEIDENFELLER

Using improvisation to develop technique and confidence with returning flutists

Lectio praecursoria

Public examination of the artistic doctoral degree (Applied Study Programme) of Kathleen Weidenfeller was held on 12 November 2022 at the Organo Hall of Helsinki Music Centre. The subject of the doctoral project and the title of the written thesis: Returning Flutists: Developing Improvisational Rehearsal Techniques for an Ensemble of Non-professional Flutists Returning to a Musical Practice. The statement of the demonstration of artistic proficiency was presented by the Chair of the Artistic Board, DMus Olli Vartiainen, and the statement of the written thesis was presented by Professor Carla Rees. Chair of the examination: Professor Tuire Kuusi.

Music performance during the lectio:

Pasi Lyytikäinen (b. 1975): *Rituale*

Pasi Lyytikäinen: *Lume*

I Moderato

II Andante, cantabile

III Con brio

IV Largo

V Valse lamentoso

Performed by the Helsinki Flute Orchestra (HHO)

RETHINKING FLUTE PEDAGOGY

I do not tune my non-professional flute ensembles in the beginning of rehearsals. This does not mean that I just accept that these ensembles will always play with bad intonation. I just feel strongly that the time used to have all the ensemble members match one pitch at the beginning of a rehearsal can be put to better use throughout the rehearsal, to working with other methods of navigating intonation challenges that arise.

As a flutist and teacher, I have always looked for unique ways to address technical and musical challenges in both my pedagogy and my own practice. Looking for

novel ways to approach challenges can provide new insights by keeping us aware and interested in finding new solutions. As an undergraduate flute performance major, I became fascinated with techniques that extended the tonal capabilities of my instrument – not just because they allowed me to play a wider range of repertoire, but also because I realised that I became more aware of how I approached different physical aspects of playing the flute while practising these techniques. Producing overtones or whistle tones required attentive awareness to the speed and direction of my air column. Percussive articulation requires awareness of how I use my tongue. Other techniques focus attention on embouchure, fingers, and other aspects. These techniques often develop musculature that helps to develop my core sound. For me, working with these techniques transformed practising from a chore that easily slipped into mindlessness into an exercise in curiosity and exploration.

Since there was little material available for beginning flutists, I needed improvisation to incorporate these techniques into lessons. As I continued to teach, I saw the effectiveness of exploratory improvisation as a pedagogical tool, helping students not only develop their technique but also their musical understanding and ensemble skills.

CHALLENGES FACING RETURNING ADULT LEARNERS

So, ten years ago, when I began my time at the Helsinki Flute Orchestra, Helsingin Huiluorkesteri (HHO), I knew that I wanted to create a rehearsal environment that supported curiosity and exploration, because I also understood that returning to a musical practice involves much more than just pulling an old instrument off the shelf. I knew that to create that kind of environment I would need to try to understand some of the emotional challenges that can cause frustration and anxiety for returning musicians.

In my own experience as a returning musical learner, what surprised me the most were the emotional roadblocks that I threw up for myself at every turn. While I know how important it is to provide a supportive space for my students, where they can understand the importance of appreciating mistakes and failures as guideposts in learning, I did not give myself that same luxury. It took me a surprisingly long time to really understand that the mistakes I made during the learning process did not diminish my abilities; nor did they tarnish my identity. Instead, they were an important part of the learning process. I wanted to find a way to help other returning adult musicians navigate their new learning experience with less of the anxiety I had experienced.

The returning flutists who participate in the HHO often explain to me, during the first rehearsal they attend, both how excited they are to be playing with us and then, often in the same sentence, give me a list of their limitations. Something along

the lines of “Hi! I’m so excited to have found this ensemble, but I want you to know I have a bad sense of rhythm”, or “My low/high register isn’t very good”, or “I can’t play very fast”. Sometimes they would say the next part out loud, but even when they did not, it was always implied: “...and that’s not going to change at this point. This is how I play.” I did not set out to create high-level performances, but to help the returning flutists rediscover their musical voice, find joy in developing new skills, and gain confidence in performance. I wanted them to understand that they could re-examine and expand the ideas they had constructed about themselves.

While collecting internalised beliefs about the fixed nature of one’s abilities is certainly not only practised by adult learners, adults have had a longer time to collect those beliefs and practise them very well. Holding onto these beliefs is like putting on a suit of armour and a pair of sound-cancelling headphones before walking into a rehearsal. You might be well protected, but you cannot hear much, and there is no room to move or grow. And, when the well-protected returning musician walks into a rehearsal to meet the very well-intentioned director who is eager to tell the returning flutists how they can get their best performance, they cannot hear that. So, it is easy to see how everyone involved can easily become frustrated and anxious.

Along with these internalised beliefs, navigating new social connections also takes time and vulnerability. As wonderful as it may be to find a group of people who share your passion for music, it can feel rather scary to actually become a contributing member of that new group. As one of the returning flutists of the HHO said during a rehearsal: “We’re not kids any more. We already have a fully formed identity, and it is hard to put that aside and become part of a new group.” And yet, we learn from having new social interactions. And returning musicians in particular bring a great deal of musical knowledge and understanding to their new musical practice, which could benefit the entire ensemble. So, a director needs to find a way to create space and support for those social connections to happen.

INTRODUCING IMPROVISATION

I wanted to use improvisation to help create that space. I had already been successfully using improvisatory exercises with my school-aged student ensembles, encouraging the musicians to draw on whatever skills and musical knowledge they have already internalised, rather than asking them to learn a set of new musical rules before entering the improvisation. I also encouraged my students to reflect during these exercises through directed questions and peer performances, to help increase awareness and develop musical skills. It therefore seemed natural to try to adapt and develop these exercises further for use with the returning flutists. I would love to say that introducing this kind of improvisation to the HHO was a success from the be-

ginning, and that I had no problem coming in as a guide rather than simply telling my new ensemble what to do. But that would not be true. I had a lot of reflection to do as well.

I first tried introducing improvisation in the same way I do with my younger students, with an exercise I call “G”: first because it simply involves exploring all the ways we can perform a concert G, and then asking the students to create a spontaneous musical work with just that one note. I have my students stand around the rehearsal hall so that they have no visual contact; they must rely on listening to each other. The first performance is almost always chaotic – but the young students are also quick to tell me how chaotic and weird it sounds. They are also interested in discussing how we could make it into a more interesting performance. When I ask them to think about how the pieces they are playing in their own lessons are shaped, or to think about conversations they have with their friends, they are eager to try again.

This was not the case in the beginning with the returning flutists. When I used this same exercise in their rehearsal, the first performance was calm and quiet. The returning flutists played mainly long tones, mostly staying in one octave. When I started a discussion similar to what I used with the younger students, it had no real effect on the next performances. I tried expanding the exercise to encourage the returning flutists to use more musical material, in the hope that it would result in a more interesting performance. It still resulted in what sounded like parallel playing, with no real listening or interaction going on between the flutists. While the returning flutists would eagerly share stories and interact socially during rehearsals, it did not seem that they were yet comfortable exploring musically together. It was apparent that for the returning flutists I would have to find a different way to lay the groundwork for cooperative exploration.

I turned to games from the improvisational theatrical culture for help. I had the returning flutists play games that involved learning each other’s names, awareness games where mistakes were celebrated, and movement exercises that helped the returning flutists become aware of their physical presence. Surprisingly, simple walking exercises where I asked the returning flutists to be aware of how they moved, first individually and then together as a group, not only helped increase awareness during rehearsals but gave me insight in how the returning flutists were interacting – I could see when some of them were keeping to themselves, or when they were interacting together, even if it was to roll their eyes at doing these exercises, since they were never very popular. But, noticing what went on during these exercises allowed me to adjust how I interacted, both with the ensemble as a whole and with the individuals in the ensemble, in other situations during rehearsals. I began to understand which individuals felt comfortable taking chances, and who might be more intimidated by certain challenges. I could encourage the individuals that stayed to themselves to share during rehearsals and find ways to make sure they understood

how they were important members of the ensemble.

I also changed the type of improvisational exercise I used when we were returning to instrumental improvisation. Since the freer improvisatory exercises had seemed uncomfortable for the returning flutists, I started with a more structured exercise. I had them play familiar folk tunes and encouraged them to intentionally play “wrong” notes or change a rhythm during the performance. This worked better than the free improvisation had and invited laughter as well. Once I added a rhythmic accompaniment to the performance, the returning flutists felt even more confident in making changes to the tunes, and the exploration took off. What really surprised me was how easily and eagerly the returning flutists were able to create a simple harmonic accompaniment for the folk songs. Most of them played enough piano to accompany songs and were able to transfer this knowledge to the exercise. So, it was not long before the ensemble was able to play variations on folk tunes with a harmonic accompaniment they had created themselves; and these then evolved into freer improvisations. As the ensemble became comfortable with the idea of exploring in this way, I prepared for rehearsals by developing exercises to help with challenges that I anticipated would arise, or that had arisen during earlier rehearsals.

I mentioned intonation at the start of this lectio – which is, of course, one of the most difficult challenges a flute ensemble will face. I had developed exercises that required the returning flutists to be aware of how they direct their airstream into the flute (bending tones) and breathing exercises to help create awareness of how the breath moves in the body. Still, what turned out to be one of the most effective intonation exercises was one I originally thought would help increase concentration. In this exercise, which I call “Favourite Scale”, each returning flutist plays their own favourite scale, at the same time – conducted, with the ensemble playing half notes, slowly, so that the end result is rich, thick chords. Everyone must concentrate to stay within the key they have chosen, but as there are so many more interesting sounds happening than when everyone is playing the same scale, there is a lot more to pay attention to. The resulting chords are so interesting that they invite curious listening. The returning flutists understand when these chords sound good with little input from me. It reinforces the fact that they do have an internal understanding of intonation, and that they can rely on that understanding during performances. When difficulties in intonation arose at other points during rehearsals, I could remind the returning flutists of these chords, and of how well they listened and played in tune; this helped them navigate these other challenges.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION IN IMPROVISATION

The discussions that took place around the improvisations were often more im-

portant than the actual played improvisations. Sometimes these discussions led the exercises in directions I could not have anticipated. For example, an exercise I originally developed to practise rhythms might turn into an articulation exercise when, during discussion, the returning flutists mentioned they were having difficulty articulating a certain rhythm. I could then ask them to use different types of articulations to become more aware of how they were using their tongue and encourage them to share with each other what they were realising, to help them discover an easier way of articulating the passage. It may be that they were able to internalise the rhythm after the exercise, but they also developed their articulation skills.

I also used improvisational exercises to help develop technical and reading skills. In one piece where several of the returning flutists had solos based on American folk songs, these soloists were having technical difficulties with their parts. I asked each of the soloists to isolate and play the notes found in their solos, first slowly in order, and then slowly to play around with them: in different orders, with different rhythms, different octaves. Once they had done that for a while, I had the rest of the ensemble play the accompaniment as a loop, and each soloist in turn improvised a solo, using the notes and ideas from the original. After doing this once we had a discussion, and while the ensemble was very polite, the soloists themselves said they felt their improvised solos were not interesting and not at all like the originals. We then ended up in a discussion on the similarities and differences between American and Finnish folk music, and talked about how folk music is by its nature very improvisatory. Several of the flutists were able to add personal experiences to the conversation. After this discussion, when they improvised the solos again, they sounded much more alive. When we went back to playing the original written solos, one of the returning flutists commented that they noticed it did not even matter if some of the notes were not quite right, as long as they had the spirit of the solo in their performance.

One of the most important lessons I learned as a teacher and director during this project was knowing when to step back and give space to the returning flutists, both in rehearsals and performances. As their own confidence rose, I could add to this by showing my own trust in their abilities, by allowing them to take the lead in making musical decisions. This often came up during discussions around the exercises; one of the hardest things about using questions was to just stop and listen to the answers, rather than jumping in with what I thought were the right answers.

Another way I encouraged sharing and communal creation of knowledge was through having the returning flutists break into small groups and create improvisational performances for each other, and then ask those listening to come up with three adjectives to describe the performance. The same group would perform again, this time exaggerating those adjectives; or, then a second group could recreate what they heard, using the adjectives as a guide. Developing improvisations in this way

helped the returning flutists understand how their performances sounded to an audience, while it also helped them gain confidence in their own musical ideas.

The need to learn to step back applied to my actual conducting as well. As the returning flutists worked with the exercises, they learned that my gestures were more for support than control. The more confident I became in my conducting gestures, the less I needed them. I often noticed in rehearsals that if the returning flutists found my gestures unclear, it was because I was trying to give too much information, or used gestures that were too large. When I can instead step back, and project the confidence I have in the ensemble, that confidence is contagious. And when we have worked through such challenges together, by the time of the performance they do not usually need a larger or clearer gesture – they need my trust.

Working in this way allowed the HHO to develop into a working community. In addition to becoming more confident in performances, *how* the ensemble worked became important to the returning flutists – a set of unwritten rules about how everyone participated during rehearsals and performances began to emerge. We no longer had the attendance problems that plagued the ensemble in the early days, and the returning flutists themselves naturally took on organisational roles that helped rehearsals run more smoothly. It became easy to add new members to the ensemble, and those that joined quickly became part of the community, since there was an established community ready to welcome them.

RETURNING MUSICIANS IN THE WIDER MUSICAL COMMUNITY

Investing the time and energy I did into this ensemble also affected the entire flute community. For most of this project, I was able to include the HHO as part of my regular teaching schedule at LUHMO – the Northwest Helsinki Music Institute. This allowed me to include my younger school-aged students in many of the performances of the HHO. From the very beginning I used works that included improvisational elements written for a wide range of technical skills, which allowed me to include my beginning students in the performances to introduce them to working in a large ensemble. As the project and the HHO developed, I could also invite my more advanced students to play alongside the returning flutists. This gave my students the opportunity to work in a larger group than would otherwise have been possible at our small school, and allowed us to perform works with a larger orchestration.

The sense of community that developed between the students and returning flutists was immediately obvious. At breaks during rehearsals, I would find my youngest students eagerly chatting with the oldest members of the HHO. My older students obviously enjoyed being asked for advice from the returning flutists, and that helped build their confidence. Still today, several years since we have been able to collabo-

rate in this way, my students will ask about the HHO, and the returning flutists also ask about the students they remember.

This sense of being part of the larger musical community plays out in other ways as well. Many of the returning flutists hold season tickets to Helsinki's orchestras and opera. The returning flutists of the HHO have also taken it upon themselves to attend as many flute concerts in the Helsinki area as possible together as a group. The ensemble has eagerly participated in national flute festivals. Because of their participation in the ensemble, several of the members have purchased new instruments and are more likely to keep their instruments in good working order, using the services of local instrumental technicians. Furthermore, I knew that my exercise in introducing the returning flutists to contemporary performance practices was effective when one of the more conservative returning flutists in the ensemble told me that they had attended a premiere of a work "where they used strange sounds like we do", and said: "I was actually able to listen this time, and really appreciate what they were doing, and for the first time, I found it enjoyable."

The HHO also had two collaborations with professional musicians during this project. The first was during the 35th anniversary festival Gala concert of the Finnish Flute Association, where I was asked to open the ensemble to the participants of the festival. There, the HHO formed the base of an ensemble of about 50 non-professional and professional flutists from around the world who were participating in the performance. For the Linnunlaulu concert in 2017, I invited flute teachers to join the HHO for the entire rehearsal period and concert. Again, in both instances, members of the HHO commented on how exciting it was to be able to work alongside professional musicians. They eagerly used the professional musicians as a source of information, in the same way as they had asked for advice from my students.

During the Linnunlaulu concert period, the HHO also worked closely with many of the composers that wrote the works they performed. Many of the composers attended rehearsals during the period, so the members of the HHO were able to ask them specific questions about their works. There was a particularly close collaboration with Pasi Lyytikäinen, who I commissioned to compose two of the works performed in the concert.

This project has shown how it is possible to use improvisation and extended techniques with non-professional musicians, both in performance and as a rehearsal tool. It has become apparent not only to me but to other members of the flute community that these returning flutists have gained confidence in their performances and also developed as an ensemble. This project opened up conversations on the importance of high-level ensemble experiences for non-professional musicians returning to a musical practice, and the role they play in the greater musical community. It is my hope that this project will encourage the further development of ideas and material for working with this important part of the musical community.