

THE ZOO



ABOUT IMPROVISATION, ABOUT THIS ALBUM

Ever since I was a child, I loved improvising, without knowing it was called improvising. Whenever my violin teacher would put some scores on my little music stand, I thought it was a waste of time to read all of these notes. If he'd play a melody for me, I would rather just copy him directly by ear. Or rather, invent my own melody. I must have given such improvised recitals endlessly, with my stuffed animals as my sole audience.

While at Secondary school, I discovered that improvising is actually not all that common for classically-trained violinists. Competitions would never ask their participants to dream up something themselves, which I thought was odd. The further I progressed, the more it went without saying to me: a violinist plays music composed by a composer. This composer is often already dead for a number of years, and was a big genius in any case.

Yet still I kept improvising during my education. My harmony teacher at the Utrecht Conservatory, Jaap Zwart (also featured on this very album), stimulated me as a teenager to write my own cadenzas (solo parts in a concerto which, indeed, were often improvised in the 18th and 19th centuries) for a Mozart concerto, and to adjoin my own pieces of music in one of Bach's. At the Royal College of Music in London, where I continued my studies, I found out you could take improvisation classes as an optional course. Needless to say, I enrolled.

Nevertheless, in all these years, I never heard any classical musician improvise on stage. Ever so seldomly, I would encounter improvisations on the albums of some freer spirits, but it remained playing a rather meager part. An introduction, an intermezzo, a bridge between two pieces.

So why is that? We've become used to a sharp divide between performers and creators. Someone who's been endlessly perfecting their bowing technique, can surely not compete with a composer who's spent his whole life composing? It wouldn't hurt to understand that this divide is not just an artificial one, but also relatively young. For composers who predate World War 2, it was actually quite commonplace to wear several hats. Musicians we now adore as composers, were perhaps rather seen as performers: think about Sergei Rachmaninoff or Franz Liszt, or even Johann Sebastian Bach; someone who would play music in churches, whether it being his own music or someone else's.

Speaking of Bach: he improvised as well. Indeed, it's very likely that the lion's share of his surviving pieces for organ, are simply examples for his sons and other students ("See, this is how you do that."). Ever still, organists are the exception to the rule. Organists who play in services, are deemed to continue playing until the clergyman would speak, or until everyone had left the church: oftentimes, they couldn't do anything but improvise. And why is it that we hardly have any music for organ by, for example, Anton Bruckner, who was an organist himself? Someone who invents something on the spot, doesn't have to write anything down.

There's a lot to be learned from this organ tradition. Performers aren't afraid to improvise, and during organ recitals, the improvisation is often regarded as a climax. Fortunately, there are a lot of contemporary composers who value the art of improvisation, and even make it a substantial part of their works. Yet still, completely standalone, free improvisations are in rather short supply in our classical music venues. That is a shame, because we forfeit such a vast amount of beauty.

Even more so: scientific studies show that improvised elements can increase the audience's involvement.

I remain positive, though. I think improvisation will take an ever-growing role in music, and I see this in everyone around me, in the people I share the stage with. In a time where anything that is already established is within reach (you think about going to a concert, you check the program online and within a tap or two your device plays the music to be performed), the element of surprise is definitely a necessary one.

In the run up to this recording, I have studied the potential of free-form duo improvisations for around three years. This was usually done from the comfort of my own home with a set of microphones, or at Rembrandt Frerichs' attic, but sometimes also in a radio studio – sending the music directly into the ether. Ever since, I've been looking for like-minded musicians. A remarkable music label presented itself for this adventure, one whose key values are musical adventure and the highest possible sound quality. In June 2019 we started recording.

So how does one do this improvising, actually? It's very different for each of us, but I think that most co-improvisers recognize this: to be able to improvise, you'd have to bring yourself into a *flow state*. All possible troublesome thoughts must go to be able to fully take in the atmosphere, the space, and most of all, the musicians. By improvising, you train your ability to enter that flow state, something that's even beneficial when playing composed music. My ideal is that a composition sounds as spontaneous as possible: my goal is to perform a piece that feels like something new – as if I'm improvising. And conversely, an improvisation should sound as logical as a composition.

When improvising, you take with you all your musical baggage; everything you've ever heard or played in your life. But the space you're in has its influence as well. The improvisations in the Oude Sint-Victorkerk in Batenburg, a tiny and very cozy church in a quiet town along the Maas river, have a character very distinct from those recorded at the Orgelpark in Amsterdam, a larger church hall from 1918 with vibrant colors and impressive organs on all four sides.

"Do you never even make an agreement about the key beforehand?", is one of the questions I regularly get asked whenever I talk about improvisations. No, a key is never discussed beforehand. One person just starts playing, the other responds, thus developing a musical piece. With all duos I recorded a series of finished improvisations. With some of them, we would sometimes discuss the structure or atmosphere of the improvisation that would follow, others would prefer creating something out of nothingness. Funnily enough, the first take of the improvisation session has often made the album. These are the takes where you really start from zero, just the sound of the environment (in Batenburg, this meant the songs of the birds outside of the church – no surprise we let ourselves be inspired by that). Later takes are often a response to the previous ones; the tempo or character are in contrast to a previous take, or a melody is reused.

I'm sure you're aware that all these improvisations are named after animals. Here's why. When listening back to all the takes in an effort to choose which ones would make it onto the album, I noticed more and more animal terms in my notebook. Some takes reminded me of elephants, deep sea creatures, or my own bunny. Animals act and react out of instinct and trust their intuition entirely.

In improvisation, you must also trust your intuition completely: it forms the basis on which improvised music is created. Our intuition is often much undervalued in today's society, but even according to Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, intuition is the best counsellor, for example when faced with difficult decisions. This album is, in some sense, an ode to intuition.

It's not programmatic music: the music itself was there first. However, by naming these pieces, because you do need names to tell one from another, they started to live their own lives in a different way. To me, it's already impossible to associate, for example, the take we named after the monarch butterfly, with another animal. The album became a zoo, one without chains or cages, a garden where every animal can move about freely.

Finally, you may notice it didn't stop at just one disc. When Brendon Heinst, recording engineer and founder of the record label TRPTK, and I were selecting takes for the album, we ended up with a logically concluding album. However, there were still too many takes that were just as significant as the ones that made it. We grew fond of these pieces, and didn't want to keep them from you. We therefore named the takes on this bonus disc after animals that are threatened to go extinct.

I wish you lots of joy listening to this album.

Merel Vercammen

