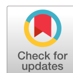

British Journal of Music Education (2024), **41**, 305–315
doi:10.1017/S026505172400007X

ARTICLE

Improvisation pedagogy: what can be learned from off-task sounds and the art of the musical heckle?

Jackie Walduck

Department of Music and Audio Technology, University of Kent, The Historic Dockyard, Medway, Kent ME4 4TZ, UK
Email: j.walduck@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

A tension between freedom and constraint is characteristic of improvisation practice and pedagogy, presenting challenges for teachers/workshop leaders. To create musical focus in ensemble improvisation, some sounds are encouraged, whilst others are edited out, ignored or marginalised. This article investigates improvised sounds as central or subaltern, asking how marginal sounds such as musical 'heckles' and off-task sounds can be accepted meaningfully into musical frameworks. I question what can be *learned* from subaltern sounds. How can power structures within the improvisation workshop be subverted by listening to sounds outside teacher-defined frames, and how can listening become inclusive without sessions descending into chaos?

Keywords: Improvisation; leadership; heckle; community music; autism

Freedom, constraint and holding the leadership reins

> From the perspective of the community musician, facilitation is understood as a process that enables participants' creative energy to flow, develop, and grow through pathways specific to individuals and the groups in which they are working. Facilitation does not mean that the community musician surrenders responsibility for music leadership, only that control is relinquished.
>
> Higgins (2012, p. 148)

A thin line is trodden between freedom and constraint when leading a group improvisation workshop. When working without *a priori* rules (completely 'free' improvisation), the music *can* sound aimless, and participants may feel unsafe not knowing what to do. Setting boundaries can scaffold freedom (Biasutti, 2017; Higgins, 2012), but the reality of leading very scaffolded workshops can mean using additional gatekeeping processes: editing participant contributions to gain an ensemble focus, allowing some sounds and restricting others. In the real-time improvisation workshop environment, leaders may find themselves holding the reins tightly or loosely: pruning, shaping the improvisation, or encouraging bolder, dramatic, or unexpected sounds, fostering variety and creativity. To bring form to the music, some sounds are encouraged, and others may become marginalised. Drawing on perspectives from improvisation pedagogy at school and tertiary levels, community music and improvisation as a creative practice, this paper discusses freedom and constraint in the context of inclusive workshop-leading practices within community music and when working with participants with additional needs. It considers and evaluates marginalised sounds to suggest ways of listening more openly in these and mainstream learning contexts.

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The pull between in-the-moment freedom and constraint is represented in improvisation literature (e.g. Bailey, 1992; Berkowitz, 2010; Berliner, 1994; Borgo, 2002) and improvisation pedagogical literature (Borgo, 2007; Hickey, 2015). Whilst the idea of an improvisation ensemble (including jazz) suggests an ethos of democracy, spontaneity and inclusivity, Berliner (1994, p. 418) explores the relationship between band leadership styles and their impact on jazz musicians' creative freedom. If a band gels, the ideals of self-expression and collective effort come into play simultaneously. However, this does not always happen – the band may pull in different directions undoing musical coherence. Berliner illustrates, through musicians' testimonies, that solving this problem often brings tight-rein (more autocratic) leadership into conflict with these values. To maintain them, differing artistic opinions can be negotiated through compromise, humour and a looser rein.

Bailey (1992) and Berliner (1994) in equally seminal but divergently positioned works on improvisation tackle the relationship between traditions – known forms or idioms, and originality – spontaneous musical creation. For Bailey, whose own work is rooted in free improvisation, spontaneity lies *away* from known genres, and for Berliner, it is located *within* the interpretation of the tradition, through ornamentation and variation of an acquired jazz 'language'.

In learning contexts, improvisation is valued as a way to encourage agency and creativity in students and workshop participants and here, too, issues of freedom and constraint surface. Part of the pedagogic value of improvisation is that learning often takes place in groups: creativity and knowledge are distributed and socially situated between learners (Borgo, 2007; Kanellopolous, 2011). Borgo's perspective of advanced ensemble improvising classes advocates group over individual learning and creativity over the reiteration of musical ideas, so that what is captured is the complexity of an evolving system – the improvising group. In steering such groups, he draws on an idea from drama improvisation pedagogy: when an 'offer' is made, to accept and build upon it and avoid 'blocking' it. For teachers, this contains 'an inherent challenge to avoid circumscribing or over-directing the group flow' (2007, p. 83). Positioning the improvising ensemble as a complex dynamic system, he argues:

> . . . jazz musicians must strike an uneasy and ever-changing balance between the exploration of new ideas and the exploitation of strategies, devices, and practices that have already been integrated into the system. They seek persistent disequilibrium, by avoiding constancy, but also restless change.
>
> (Borgo, 2007, p. 86)

In nurturing such a system, the reins are held loosely. A desire for instability appears to motivate the students to experiment with new sounds and sound combinations. However, their advanced training presumably yokes the students to known forms, inhibiting too much deviation – disequilibrium but not pandemonium.

In community and Special Educational Needs settings, improvisation can be a useful leveller, particularly with mixed experience or mixed ability groups, as it allows for straightforward or complex contributions within the ensemble; Higgins's developmental 'pathways specific to individuals' are quoted above (2012, p. 148). Practice is grounded in inclusivity. Often in such contexts, the emphasis, initially, is on *participation* through which learning can subsequently take place. In community music, Higgins's 'acts of hospitality' (2007) are enacted by the workshop leader welcoming participants to what are simultaneously social and musical spaces. Heterogenous views and musical interests are negotiated, ideally giving rise to co-created music that reflects multiple creative voices (Smilde, 2016). In practice, as will be discussed, many and varied are the ways of joining in: soloing, accompanying, 'riffing', noodling, blurting and private experimenting on a drum are all sounds that might occur in the informal workshop environment and could be said to lie anywhere on a continuum between co-operative and oppositional to the group endeavours.

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Improvisation contains the potential for disruption, chaos and the skirting of knowledge and power hierarchies, thereby presenting challenges for teachers and workshop leaders, perhaps more so when working with novice learners. Hickey (2015), following Borgo (2007) and Berliner (1994), suggests that free improvisation may develop most successfully in groups 'free of personality problems, individual differences or aesthetic differences that might get in the way of a smooth group process' (2015, p. 295). She goes on to point out that the realities of classroom management – larger classes (up to 30 children in the UK state sector), heterogenous interests, interpersonal dynamics, differing degrees of musical experience and the 'artificial randomness of classroom selection' (p. 295) can make the set-up challenging. For example, do learners have equivalent perceptions of music? How well do they listen to one another? Are all voices heard? How are musical ideas and territories negotiated? Conflict in classroom and community group contexts is sometimes inevitable. The role of leaders in managing/failing to manage it is addressed by Mullen (2008), who draws attention to the 'abdication' of leadership by laissez-faire community music leaders, in which conflict, boundary maintenance and responsibility (to the music, the participants, resources, etc.) are avoided. Quoting Bennis (1997), he proposes instead a model of leadership in tune with improvisation's agency and non-authoritarian stance, in which the session leader becomes a 'good steward, keeping others focused, eliminating distractions, keeping hope alive in the face of setbacks and stress' (Mullen, 2008, p. 256 [orig. Bennis, 1997, p. 199]).

Neither of them, Hickey, Higgins or Mullen, suggest non-leadership but propose a guided improvised activity. Even so, the problem remains: which sounds to encourage and which to minimise in order to *release* the participants' creativity, not trap them into formulae or lose them in chaos? With participants who have cultivated stylistic interests or learners with additional needs, the position of leader/teacher as gatekeeper to knowledge is challenged even more profoundly. Community musicians can find themselves amongst participants steeped in musical knowledge of unfamiliar genres or striving to interpret unanticipated modes of interaction or communication styles. It ceases to make sense that group leaders, situationally positioned as 'gatekeepers', should hold the keys to musical knowledge or that their particular (perhaps hegemonic) worldview is the one others should adhere to. Which sounds, then, should be included in the improvisation, who should decide, and are the reins loose or tight?

In what follows, I propose to turn these problems of freedom, constraint, learning, inclusion and artistic leadership on their heads, in a discussion of initial findings from an arts-based research project with autistic girls, *Playing A/Part*. Instead of which sounds should be included in an improvisation session to affect the best learning experience for all, the question might become: what do all the sounds of an improved session tell us? And how do we make sense of what is going on sonically, to steer (steward) the music towards a shared understanding that includes as many of the participants as we can?

Playing A/Part

Playing A/Part was an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded research project, taking place from 2019 to 2021 (Shaughnessy et al., 2021). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Kent's Central Research Ethics Committee. Its interdisciplinary approach explored drama, music, sound recording and art activities with autistic girls, with a key aim to understand autistic *experience* in and through such activities. Here I will consider findings from a music-based pilot project. The participants ($N = 6$, ages 12–15 years) attended Limpsfield Grange School, the only school in the United Kingdom solely for autistic girls. All participants attended a series of nine after-school workshops, voluntarily. Although there was no music provision at the school, the participants had all expressed an interest in music. The author, as a project co-investigator, led the practical music activity.

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Methodology

A series of nine weekly workshops explored approaches to group improvisation and composition. Data were collected in three ways:

- Workshops were filmed and subjected to videographic analysis which focused on significant moments for individuals: changes in behaviour, learning, participant insight, challenges or resolutions.
- Participants were interviewed prior to taking part using semi-structured methods, tapping musical experiences including formal/informal learning and using music in daily life. Sensory preferences across the five (external) senses were discussed during the interviews. Interview responses were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.
- Participant perspectives were gathered through journals kept during the workshops, whilst workshop leader ($N = 2$) perspectives were gathered via evaluation forms and reflective journals completed after each session.

Outcomes: off-task sounds – (1) playing for sensory pleasure

Videographic analysis was undertaken by a multidisciplinary team comprising two drama specialists, a music psychologist and musician (the author). The range of disciplinary perspectives discerned musical, embodied and vocal behaviours, revealing several distinct strategies for participation. These findings broadened the practitioners' reflective journal notes, which tracked ways in which the participants interacted in a musical fashion – for example, playing on or off pulse, copying or exchanging rhythmic patterns. However, as will be discussed, it was the 'off-task' sounds that indicated aspects of participants' *experience* of the project – one of the *Playing A/Part* research questions.

During the first three workshops on 'being a band', the group improvisations moved from chaotic to coherent. At first, maintaining a collective pulse was something we managed for perhaps 20 s before people began to spin off into their own musical worlds. For example, the participants created sounds including maintaining a musical idea whilst drifting from a shared pulse, private singing and sensorily-driven exploration of the instruments. In the third week, the sounds began to cohere as we developed skills in listening to one another and playing in time as a group.

Figure 1 shows pages from a participant's diary during weeks 1–3, in which they were invited to describe and draw the workshop activities. These illustrate an improvisation development conceived as sonic 'amoebas' to a cog-like landscape of music, suggestive of thinking that moves from elemental sounds 'ding ding DING, Don! Don! DON!' to systemic 'I made a nice tune more than 2 notes'. Video footage from the first week showed this participant running their hands repeatedly along the keyboard keys (tactile exploration), beginning tasks on pulse then becoming immersed in the pleasure of their own 'amoeba' sounds (drifting off-task, off pulse but playing for sensory pleasure). In the third workshop, her improvisations adhered to the pulse more strongly and for longer. They included more pitches, were more complex rhythmically, and, through an observance of pulse, were musically connected to others in the group.

Discussion: learning from off-task sounds

The off-task sounds from all participants were not atypical, and at first, I ignored them, focusing on the group playing together and listening to one another. However, the empirical study that underpinned this project indicated that a significant proportion of music-making was indeed off-task and was often developmental in its complexity and confidence. All the workshop sounds were reframed as various ways of participating or 'playing'. For example, sensorily driven private

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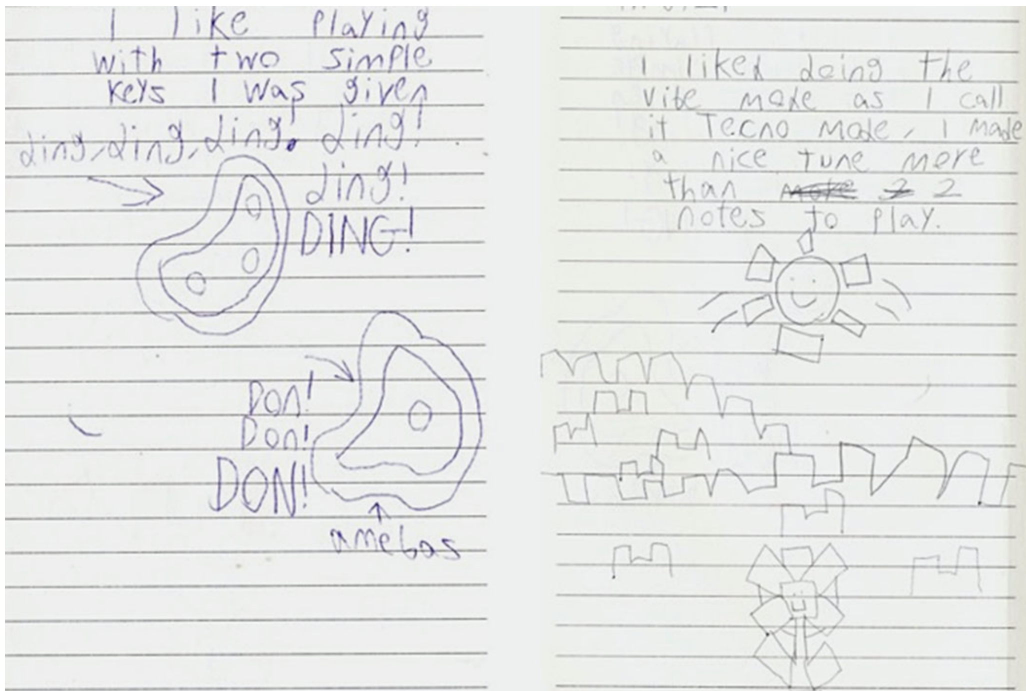

Figure 1. Amoebas to cogs.

playing, for example, musical stimming, became 'playing for pleasure', singing covertly in the gaps became 'private/public playing', and provocative sounds (see below) became 'playful playing' – playing to get a response. In many cases, these were routes to making music as an ensemble, moving towards 'proactive' and 'interactive' play that recalls Adam Ockelford's *Sounds of Intent* framework (Ockelford et al., 2011). These kinds of musical play demonstrate a will to join in the activity, suggesting both musicality and sociality. Editing them out, suppressing or continuing to ignore them would have lost the richness of input and agency – the project would have lost a sense of who the young people were as musicians and people.

Whilst the off-task sounds in *Playing A/Part* are framed as modes of play, Gershon's (2011) study of classroom soundscapes considers on- and off-task sounds as systems of learning and meaning. His study begins in a fifth-grade classroom (children aged 9–10 years). He points out the limits of a recording that favours the teacher's voice and suppresses background sounds: rustling paper, scraping chairs, a teacher's whispered encouragement to a pupil, external weather and sounds from the city. The latter set of ambient sounds contributes to the children's learning about their environment and their peers (who is concentrating, the rise in sonic activity as students reach the end of a period of focus, outside sounds of passing traffic and sirens indicating daily city rhythms or moments of crisis). As in improvisation, there are elements of the sonic environment beyond the control of teachers that nonetheless offer opportunities to learn.

These sonic epistemologies, or acoustemologies (from Feld, 1996), are amplified when the same students undertake a lesson explicitly exploring sonic learning and taking place in a woodland setting. Students work in pairs to guide blindfold partners through a wood – sounds of this classroom are verbal directions 'left here, stop there' filtered by the woodland environment, indicating distance (reverb or echo), and nested within the sounds of nature – rustling leaves and so on. Gershon argues that all of these sounds are a system of embodied learning – the children learn through sound about orientation (not tripping over tree roots), about their partners (e.g. by categorising the emotive delivery of the orientation instructions – does their partner sound

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enthusiastic, excited, bored or anxious) and about their distance from peers, indicated by the degree of echo made by others' sounds, testing how far geographically feels safe to explore. Beyond the task at hand, there is potential to learn further about the natural environment through sound: seasonal variations within the forest are reflected in the sounds of wind, birds' activity and crunchiness of leaves.

Gershon's critique challenges which sounds are accepted as 'educational' and which are left to one side:

> [. . .] part of the reason it might be difficult to conceive of sounds as educational systems resides not only in how sound has been conceptualized philosophically, ontologically, theoretically, and phenomenologically, but also due to the ways in which thinking about education is often bounded. In the same way that certain tasks have come to be regarded as on or off task according to a teacher's construction of a lesson, it seems as though sounds have been implicitly theorized in a similar fashion: Sounds that are part of the teacher's agenda are educational, those that are not, aren't. (Gershon, 2011, p. 77)

Off-task sounds of a more challenging nature in *Playing A/Part* included a form of provocative play through the deployment of musical heckles.

Off-task sounds – (2) provocative playing and musical heckles

> Clare was funny, rebellious and at 15, one of the older girls in the group. She had an accurate sense of rhythm. As could be seen from the video footage, during the first session she launched many comments and asides, some funny, some sarcastic. The ensemble music in that first session was chaotic and not 'proper' sounding (pulses dissolved after a few seconds' play). Clare refused to join in initially. However, towards the end of the session she began to play a low, loud punchy note repeatedly on the piano – an occasional provocative 'heckle'. We made this the bass line and over an eight-beat pulse she was asked if she could play her chosen sound on 1st beat of the cycle. Clare did so whilst eyeballing me – smiling, but there remained an element of challenge in her demeanour. I could not tell if this was playing to please or playing for pleasure – connecting with the ensemble because she was asked to, or at her choice.
>
> However, the connection initiated in session 1 was not borne out later. Clare's involvement diminished over the following four weeks, she often sat sideways on to the workshop, behind her keyboard, half-in and half-out of the group, staring out of the window. Occasionally, Clare contributed wry comments, rarely playing with the others during the activities, but sometimes playing a drum off-task. Perhaps she did not want her oppositional heckle to become normalised, and a way to enact opposition was to not play.

The sessions described highlight a challenge arising from the normalisation of Clare's marginal heckles. When the leadership reins were pulled in (asking Clare to fit her sound within an eight-beat pulse, making this the musical foundation), the musical result was more coherent. It could be said that the ensemble playing of all participants progressed with this rhythmic grounding in place as our bass line. However, it did not, in this instance, become a springboard for Clare's creativity.

This may partially be explained through current autistic self-advocacy thinking, which sheds light on some of the progress made towards embracing all learners, as well as problematic practices that intend to create inclusion but which in fact create barriers (Bagatell, 2010; Churchill & Bernard, 2020; Manalili, 2021). Many practices rooted in 'inclusion' are designed by neurotypicals (NTs). Well-meaning efforts to make existing courses, syllabuses and examinations available to disabled

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people attempt to *remove barriers to normalisation* (e.g. 'mainstreaming'), with a danger that people mask their disabilities in order to fit in – to appear to be like everyone else. The alternative suggested by Manalili (2021) would be to explore 'people's potential to learn and flourish in their own right' (p. 22). Clare's heckles, regardless of whether or not they were 'usefully' grounding an eight-beat rhythm, were valuable as energetic, low-pitched sounds within the workshop. They were more constructive towards the group improvising than Clare's later approach of not playing. However, they posed a challenge: how to make sense of them in a way that was fruitful for all participants?

Heckle ontologies and social functions in improvisation, stand-up comedy and learning environments

Heckles, as potentially disruptive or oppositional, hold an agency that merits further examination, particularly in its challenge to improvisation workshop leaders (or teachers) to steer between freedom and constraint. There follows an examination of heckle ontologies as meaningful contributions to improvised discourse, considering perspectives from music and stand-up comedy, the latter indicating strategies for comics to manage heckles – some of which may provide useful models for workshop leaders or teachers.

I first used the term 'heckle' as a way of describing short, repetitive (non-developing) improvised gestures that contradict the flow of another part (Walduck, 1997). Whereas punctuations in improvisation might be short gestures (e.g. stabs) that appear at the *ends* of phrases, politely adding a comma or full stop to a musical phrase, heckles sit awkwardly somewhere in the middle of a phrase – provocative or unnoticed, niggling away, repeating but not evolving. To function as a heckle, a musical utterance must stay short and *sporadic*: too long and it becomes a countersolo, too predictable in its repetition and it recedes into the musical background (like wallpaper). An exemplar (non-improvised) heckle is the first movement of Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914), in which the second violin mutters the same four-note motif throughout, its timing consistently at odds with the first violin melodic phrases.

In improvised music, heckles might be read as oppositional, a call to attention (listen to me!) or the expression of a will to take part (a player is unsure what to play – so they play a short phrase, testing the water), or a short utterance that fizzles out and is not followed by another idea. They are, necessarily, part of the improvisation, not the central narrative, but offering an additional perspective on the improvised discourse. They resemble heckles at a stand-up comedy performance – observations, asides or insults interjected from the audience towards the spontaneous (if not fully improvised) monologue delivered onstage. In both cases, the relationship between the main narrative and heckles indicates that ensemble improvisation and stand-up comedy are social, impromptu environments and, as such, entail interaction and negotiated roles (Quirk, 2015). Additionally, heckles can threaten situational (leader/speaker) power and, if hostile, can lead to feelings of vulnerability.

A portion of the stand-up comedy literature is devoted to heckles as a feature of audience–performer interaction and as a challenge to the comic's ability to hold the audience's attention (Brand, 2009; Double, 2014), as the opening to Brand's autobiography attests:

> 'Please welcome Jo Brand!'
>
> I step into the firing line.
>
> Yes, 'firing line' is the appropriate phrase. The ultimate fear of the stand-up is that a heckle will get you right in the heart and melt you like the Wicked Witch of the West, into a steaming heap of gooey stuff.
>
> (Brand, 2009, p. 1)

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> Dealing with a heckle is a test of the comedian's ability. To ignore it is to seriously undermine the audience's faith, and if the comic ploughs on relentlessly with material rather than responding, the illusion of spontaneity is broken.
>
> (Double, 2014, p. 345)

Against the comic's backbone of prepared material, heckles afford an opportunity for improvisation. In improvised music, heckles are launched from the margins, with no imperative to create a musical narrative (rather to disrupt or to commentate on what is already there). They may present a strategy for participants' engagement that is less risky than committing to a material that is intended to contribute to or change the improvised narrative – a solo, or a compelling new accompanying texture, for example. As the music tips towards instability through heckles, those in leadership roles are challenged with navigating both inclusion and clarity, for example, by finding meaning in all sounds as paths to engagement or polyhedral forms of musical expression, recalling Borgo's (2007) dynamic systems, and reifying them as such to all participants. Conversely, leaders may override sounds from the margins, ignoring them or finding other ways to steer the music towards less polyhedral-sounding territories.

Heckles in stand-up and in music can be valued as part of a dynamic improvisatory environment. The examples above shed light on ways to navigate uninvited sounds that may be useful to workshop leaders or teachers (ignore, accept as alternative narratives and incorporate into the main musical narrative). In the following examples, disruptive sounds are actively *reframed* as ways to manage the disruption to music improvisation workshops in care homes.

Reframing heckles: the tea trolley and the care home

The following accounts are from an interview with Julian West, a musician specialising in co-created, freely improvised music with people with dementia (Zeilig et al., 2019). In a care home environment, tea trolleys often come into the room during music sessions, interrupting what can be a carefully construed atmosphere:

> Both I and the team I was working with were quite annoyed by [the tea trolley] every time it came in. [The atmosphere] would be totally obliterated . . . it's quite a noisy thing you know when it comes in; there's crockery, and often the member of staff that brings it in [is] entering the space in quite a performative way (laughs), because they're here to *do* something, to give out tea and cake . . . Eventually, we were able to understand the tea trolley as a heckle – that this was an event that happens in the care home that's part of the routine.
>
> (Interview with the author, 2022)

As residents were ready for their tea and cake, it was difficult to ignore the trolley. Its sound was acknowledged as part of the wider project context, 'a call back to doing something that's . . . responding to the needs of the care home' (Interview, 2022). On the other hand, framing it as a heckle within an improvised music session provided a way to accept the sound as a call from the margins that interrupts, but does not derail, the overall musical trajectory.

A second strategy was to reframe the trolley as part of the improvisation:

> In a later project where I was working with a dancer, this came up again and the dancer knew instinctively what to do; she interacted with the tea trolley – when it came into the room and danced with the trolley, jumped on it and rode it round the room . . . So, the tea trolley did then become part of the piece that we were making. . . . [The residents] completely got the joke – so it became something that really added to the session rather than something that detracted from it.
>
> (Interview, 2022)

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In West's accounts, the workshop leaders embrace the tea trolley appearances as part of the improvisation environment. Irritation is dispelled by an acceptance of the trolley clanking in relation to the more deliberate music and dance features of the session. The acceptance of unpredictable elements within a social context recognises that not every action in this delicate environment can be controlled and that the entries of trolleys were an additional contribution to the session by offering refreshments – another way of meeting residents' needs in a care home.

In *Playing A/Part*, the formulation of several 'modes of play' (participation) enabled a new way to read the workshop. Rather than making the off-task sounds and heckles subaltern, the research team began to consider all workshop sounds as meaningful – *what* were the sounds articulating about a player's preferred way to participate, enthusiasm, their rhythmic or aural skill, musical preferences, or former experiences? For most of the project participants, these ways of playing became paths to engagement with the composition and improvisation activities on offer. Heckles, stims and covert musicking could be read as off-task diversions or re-evaluated as meaningful contributions to the wider context of the music-making – sonically, gesturally and in terms of agency over the workshop activity. Beyond Special Educational Needs, these are strategies for educators in all settings, particularly given the (now well-documented) under-diagnosis of autism in girls and minoritised genders and considering the diverse ways of learning, sensing and communicating of young people within mainstream education.

Conclusion: what can be learned from heckles and marginalised sounds?

Musical heckles are rare and underexplored. They are an example of marginalised utterance that offers a disjunct light onto a principal sound narrative such as an instrumental solo or coherently improvising ensemble. Musically, they have the potential to enrich the discourse, offering a fresh perspective to improvisation. As in the stand-up comedy environment, this can be a dynamic contribution that changes the course of the material or can be a sound that niggles away at the margins. Nonetheless, we are reminded that stand-up and music improvisation are fundamentally social enterprises and may include connectedness, conflict or exchange. A heckle may extend the scope of musical (harmonic, melodic) expression or may be a call for attention or a key to participation. In all cases, heckles and off-task sounds remind us that the world is multifaceted, and, particularly when sonic objects are made by *groups* of people, those facets may not fit together in tidy or mechanistic ways. In this sense, they resemble the function of clowns, tricksters or jokers that nudge the shadow of inclusion – that which is excluded – into the open (Bala, 2010).

One task for improvisation teachers and workshop leaders is to steer the overall sounds of the workshop – without closing down marginal voices or descending into disarray. For some participants, the latter can lead to sensory overload, so a totally 'free' environment creates a barrier to learning. Ilona Roth (2019) reminds us of the ethical dilemmas of allowing all sounds versus over-directing: does one enable the heckle and educate the class to accept heckles, or does one use the opportunity to lead the heckler towards more centralised forms of musical participation – playing a riff that fits with other layers, for example. Never tidying up the sounds would deny participants the opportunity to learn in that instance about being part of a more coherent musical texture. Beyond Special Educational Needs provision, heckles and off-task sounds could be created by any student. For teachers in mainstream settings, recognising off-task sounds as strategies for engagement, self-regulation or sensory involvement acknowledges that sensory and social experiences contribute to the embodied and situated facets of learning to improvise.

Kanellopolous (2011) suggests a Bakhtinian view of improvisation as participation in 'being', a *problem-positing* (not problem-solving) approach to music-making. They propose a pedagogy that strives 'to develop children's attitude of *consciousness* towards inventing, shaping and structuring sounds' (p128). Beyond a transmission of models or formulas, the trajectory of musical action is towards open-ended *dialogue* – utterances between selves, encompassing acting, interacting and

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apprehending. This is not allowing all sounds: there is an implied care, awareness, categorisation and understanding to this flavour of inclusivity. Pedagogy is towards building awareness and sharpening listening skills and empathy. I imagine an empathy here that is beyond an NT empathy: one in which improvisers listen openly to one another, allowing interactions to unfold not necessarily towards known models but to dialogical sonic landscapes.

The double-empathy problem, first raised by Milton (2012), accounts for ways in which NTs misunderstand autistic experience. Well-meaning inclusion strategies skew practices towards NT ways of thinking about reality, learning, what is on-task and what is off-task and apposite ways of engaging with classroom music. This leads to sidelining certain sounds and attempted ways into music-making (heckles, stims and off-task musicking). These are strategies for participation for some learners and, when reframed as *offers*, may be acknowledged as part of the whole sound. Appreciation of marginalised sounds may open the space for musical utterances such as heckles, stims and off-task musicking to become interactive and dialogical.

The approaches described in this paper, particularly those from Borgo (2007), Kanellopolous (2011) and *Playing A/Part* (Shaughnessy et al., 2021), work better with smaller groups than classes of 30. They are not a panacea for problems raised by inclusion; any more than improvisation should be a panacea for the challenges surrounding music creation and performance. The appreciation of marginalised sounds, tempered with Roth's (2019) and Mullen's (2008) reminders to steward them responsibly, may offer a constructive outlook to teachers and workshop leaders. There is no ideal 'freeness or tightness of rein' when leading an improvisation session. A good area of focus is on accepting and enjoying the dynamic environment, listening keenly to all sounds that emerge and adjusting the reins as needed to maintain an appropriate level of complexity.

Inclusive practices can be cultivated through listening to sounds that fall beyond teacher/leader-defined aims, considering all session sounds as informative. Heckles, stims and private noodling can be reframed as modes of play. Heckles and off-task sounds may be routes into participation *on the terms of the participants*, rather than those of workshop leaders or teachers. For participants, they may be a way of testing the ground, 'dipping a toe' before plunging into the improvisation. For LaBelle, sounds are 'a powerful force from which we learn the entanglement of worldly contact' (LaBelle, 2018, p. 7) reminding workshop leaders and improvisation teachers to listen carefully to centre and margins, consonant and dissonant, polite, rude, funny, silly, public and private. In practice, navigating these sounds, making the music coherent or letting it loose, remains an energising task. It is, perhaps, more like surfing a wave than treading a tightrope but makes us alive to the interactions that give vitality and meaning to the improvisation environment.

Acknowledgements. This research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/S001158/1): 'Playing A/Part: investigating the identities and experiences of autistic girls'.

The author acknowledges the support of the Royal Academy of Music, where a revised version of this article was completed.

Case study examples are pseudonymised; Julian West (musician) has expressed a preference to be named in the article.

Competing interests. This research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could potentially create a conflict of interest.

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Jackie Walduck is a composer and improviser, a senior lecturer in Community Music at the University of Kent, and an Open Academy lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music in the United Kingdom. Her research interests include collaborative composition, improvised performance, improvisation pedagogy and musical leadership in community, health and care contexts.

Cite this article: Walduck J (2024). Improvisation pedagogy: what can be learned from off-task sounds and the art of the musical heckle? *British Journal of Music Education* **41**, 305–315. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505172400007X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505172400007X Published online by Cambridge University Press