

*on jam session / unlearning improvisation / repetition as necessity for change /
disturbing the melody or atmosphere of the group / music therapy / adjusting your role through listening /
challenging music genres / structures of languages*

with **Theresia Pürmayr**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with **Theresia Pürmayr, Matteo Zoccolo** – 12 may 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

TP: What I liked today at the jam session was the spontaneous texting that came through the surrounding space where we were, in your living room. And I think it's always that... Today it was interesting with Sanaz, first we were whistling, then I had an image in my head about these birds, and I was just speaking about it, and she was joining in. And I don't know if you want information like that, or if it's too specific...

MZ: Go on!

TP: No but... um, I felt in this very, um, stream of consciousness, talking / singing. You also find out a way of how the others like to tell stories. Maybe people would not tell stories like that. But if there is a rhythm and a melody to get to a certain mood... Today I liked it. Sometimes a melody or a kind of major or minor key stays the whole time, and there is not so much change. And I always want to have a kind of excitement when I do jams, and sometimes to have something that also disturbs the melody. This is the point about jams, coming together and creating something without knowing what will happen, that's the great thing.

MZ: Yeah, I was reading 'A Choreographer's Handbook' by Jonathan Burrows, he speaks about repetition as a necessity for change. I think that's pretty much what we experienced.

TP: Exactly! Sometimes people stay in their comfort when they find a way together, the melody or a chord that they like. And after a while, I feel like it makes me want to change... It puts me in a very light mood where I feel very free to just make things that could be, um... Something like a thunder. And then I don't know how it is for the others, because some people are already very happy when they find this common rhythm and melody. And I also understand that point. But for me, when it's too long in this common melody, then I always feel like there should be something that breaks it. And I think also with painting, for me it's the same. When there is too much harmony it becomes very easy. And easiness is something great, but it can become like, um... Just without any substance. I'm searching for that also when I invent text and I just start to say something. When I start singing, new associations always come, and also other people can join if they feel like. I liked it when I was singing and talking with Fritz on the microphone. First we were just repeating the same words in German, and trying to connect those words we said. Words that sound similar but mean something else. Then we came more and more to a kind of meaning inside the words.

And I think that with music, it can also be like that. Maybe somebody makes a sound, or like a clap, or whatever, and that reminds you of something else. And then you can join in, but I also like to wait sometimes and just to listen. And then, when I feel the impulse of doing something, I can

react.

That's something I really like because there is no force to make a song or to make a piece that has a certain form. You can just sit and listen, or you can also let out the mood that the rhythm or the group creates. But you are also part of the group, and so the others can react with their rhythms or they would stay with theirs. Yeah, I think that's interesting.

MZ: It's a lot!

TP: Yeah. But there is much more. I think also in music therapy they use similar concepts. Have you ever joined something like that?

MZ: Not really...

TP: I did an internship in a psychosocial health center, and there I also went to the music therapy class. There were different trainings or exercises where people had dialogues with different instruments, they could just take something and then they could surprise themselves, which role they would take with this instrument. There were also drums for rhythms, some loud instruments and some more quiet. And then we were talking about in which role they felt themselves, and if they enjoyed it or not. The idea was that one plays after the other, and you always react to the others. How we play here it's very much... Yeah, we don't have rules. And sometimes we say, "Oh, now maybe we start quietly." Or if somebody wishes to have a minor or major key, then we also speak about it, but we don't make it like a game, we don't fix any dialogue rules. That could also be interesting. Yeah, it's just nice to meet people in that way. For me it's nice because I also don't know the people outside these sessions very well. Some yes, but not all of them. OK, I also jam with people I know very well, but music also works with strangers.

MZ: Yeah, that's a cool thing about music. And I have to say, I was very surprised when we were jamming, I don't remember where, actually. Ryan's place? No, Silly's place! I remember, at a certain point I think I told you something like, "Yeah, can you try to be a bit louder? I don't hear you!" And you were telling me, "No, actually I don't want to be louder because there are already too many instruments and too many voices." You were just making something, you know, that doesn't get highlighted, but rather stays kind of in the background, and it builds something for others. And I thought that this was an interesting metaphor for listening. So, how do you think this is related to listening, in a broad sense?

TP: This is your topic, right?

MZ: I mean, it's my interest!

TP: Yeah! Listening to others in the jam sessions, or

listening in general?

MZ: Let's speak about listening in the jam. Let's be specific, because otherwise it gets into places...

TP: Yeah! That makes a song work, or a dialogue work. You have to start to listen, because otherwise you just say it for yourself. If you just start to listen you make the connection possible, I would say. When you start to listen, you can still decide to be loud when it fits. Alright. When you listen, then you can find out which role you want to take. But if there is nothing yet to listen to, then you can also maybe start with something. But when you don't listen, then maybe you just play the melody again and again, and then maybe it gets boring. Or you just play something you learned, and not like something that could really be... Exchanged. OK, you can also play something you learned, and the others react to it, but maybe also for yourself, or at least I like it...

MZ: To challenge.

TP: Yes. And I don't have a certain genre that I like to represent in a jam. I just don't feel like always playing reggae, or something like that. I also jam with a guy that likes to have these jazzy rhythms and melodies. And it always puts me in a funny mood where I also feel very free to text, because the melodies he plays are so amusing. I like it, but it's not so musically interesting for me, rather than having some disturbing noises or...

MZ: It's like a one-way communication.

TP: Yes!

MZ: Someone sets a structure, and then you follow. But there is not an exchange that allows you to actually say something. And maybe that's the reason why you want to introduce this, uh, dissonances, or these weird things in between, so that you can say, "Hey, I also have something to say!"

TP: That's a good idea how you mean it, I didn't realize why it's important for me. Maybe it's a bit like, "OK, we should be aware of it. We can create anything right now! We don't have to create a certain thing we know. We don't have to produce... Reproduce something." And this can happen very quickly when you feel comfortable with something you do that you already did once and, you know. "Oh, yes, I just do this and voilà, I'm already there, nobody would be disturbed by me." But on the other side it avoids the possibility of just... It's not about the communication, more about the music.

MZ: Alright. It's more about the music that you do with people. I mean, music not only as an addition of everyone who's making a sound, but as something more.

TP: Yeah...

MZ: It's like 1+1=3, not 2! There is something more in being together and doing something together.

TP: Yes. It's funny, this jam group is also new for me. First, I was like, "Oh cool!" And then there is this Hungarian song, a Spanish or Latin American song... I like the atmosphere they create. But I wonder, when we play the same song every time... It's funny and I can sing them already, but for me jamming is about something else. For me it's interesting to just... Also, sometimes when I get a too clear image of, "Ah, OK, this is this kind of music..." Then I feel like it's time for something else. I don't know if it's the same for you.

MZ: Yes!

TP: But sometimes I feel like there is this certain atmosphere that comes again and again, for example, this 'oooooooooooo', this very comfortable ground that could create a kind of esoteric atmosphere. That could be a good starting point. But sometimes I feel it stays very long in this atmosphere in our jams. It's more like a kind of meditation in which you could also switch off your brain. I think that's very healthy as well, but I also think this mood exists very much in the art university. This very relaxed, nearly one-note tone. I also like this kind of music sometimes, where you just have one note and then some small variations. But I also feel like playing something that surprises or challenges me. It's funny that people go to improvisation courses where they learn how to improvise jazz, for example.

MZ: But then they're always stuck in that structure.

TP: Yes, stuck in the genre. They're excellent musicians, but this is not what I want to learn.

MZ: You know, now that I hear you speaking, I find that maybe there is a good parallel with languages, like Italian, German... Like in genres, you have certain rules, a grammar, you know, like jazz has also a sort of lexicon. You can spend your time learning that, so that you can communicate with other people who have learned that language. For example, I cannot speak the language of jazz, I never learned it, it's like Arabic for me. And you have all these languages, and if we want to play blues, we know that it has a certain structure, it has four bars, there is a key, and then we can play that. But I see that you're seeking for another level of communication that is beyond that.

TP: That is in between things. Or that connects different languages. Yeah. I think that's very interesting.

MZ: Maybe it's not even about the language, maybe it really goes far from languages by just reacting to sounds

without any given structure.

TP: On the other hand, I think that also when you go away from those languages, you will find other kinds of structures, and that is because we speak languages. Also, when you didn't learn an instrument, you can still play it by using repetitions and structures we are used to hearing. And that doesn't mean that you think, "Now I will represent this or that structure." But still, I think we have a kind of aesthetic feeling by which things can be combined. And that also creates something. And you don't have to call it language. It's a pattern, and I think that's interesting because it can be defined by grammar, but it doesn't have to be.

MZ: Let's imagine, a Hungarian meets, um...

TP: A Mongolian?

MZ: Yes. And then they don't know how to communicate, because the Hungarian doesn't speak Mongolian and the Mongolian and vice versa. If two people don't have any common ground it doesn't mean they cannot communicate, they have to find a new language, new because they invented it, and maybe it's with gestures, with music...

TP: With similar sounds they have in their vowels...

MZ: And if the Hungarian continues to speak in Hungarian and the Mongolian continues to speak Mongolian, they will not communicate. So, they have to find a way in between.

TP: Or they would learn the language of the other person! That's also possible.

MZ: Yeah, but I don't feel like I can learn jazz if I play with a jazz musician that it's not willing to adapt to my language.

TP: I think it would take some time, but then... I mean, that's how we learned our language as well, from screaming to words. I think we could learn it, if you start to listen and try to imitate, then you can adapt. I think it's possible, no?