



The Otoasobi Project: Improvising with Disability

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a community-oriented, improvisation-focused initiative known as *The Otoasobi Project*. First, I situate the project in relation to the fields of free improvisation, “outsider music,” and music therapy. Then, in reference to several video excerpts, I discuss *The Otoasobi Project*, examining the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities, musicians, and music therapists have been able to make improvised music with one another, forging an inclusive space for musical and social interaction that has had both aesthetic and therapeutic benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the meaning and impact of musical improvisation in a community setting, namely *The Otoasobi Project* through which people with intellectual disabilities, as well as their families, musicians, and music therapists, make improvised music with one another. In my experience as a music therapist, I have regularly incorporated improvisation into music therapy sessions with clients who have various forms of intellectual disability. At times, I have felt as though there is a perceived dichotomy between the aesthetic/artistic dimensions of improvisation and its therapeutic benefits. When I improvise with children who have disabilities, the results are often quite interesting musically and aesthetically. Unfortunately, some parents are unable to see/hear the benefits to their children because they do not consider the sounds that their children make to be music. Instead, they regard their children's improvised musical expression as resulting from, or being symptomatic of, their children's disability and therefore without artistic value. This view lies in direct contrast to my own experience and, I believe, that of many of the musicians/clients with whom I have collaborated.

In my view, the improvised music created by people with learning disabilities is not only therapeutic, but also musically and aesthetically engaging, so much so that I wanted to find a way to share it with professional improvising musicians and with the public. That was the initial inspiration for *The Otoasobi Project*, which brings improvisers with disabilities together with leading figures in the field of improvised music. This paper critically examines some of the results of these encounters, focusing in particular on the role of musical improvisation within this context. But first, I will situate the project in relation to the fields of free improvisation, outsider art/music, and music therapy.

FREE IMPROVISATION

In his influential book, *Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music*, pioneering improvising guitarist Derek Bailey distinguishes between idiomatic and non-idiomatic or "free" improvisation:

Idiomatic improvisation is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom - such as jazz, flamenco or baroque - and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation. Although it can be highly stylised, it is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity (1992, xi-xii).

Although free improvisation may not be tied to genre-specific musical constraints in the same way as idiomatic forms, there are implicit guidelines within free modes of improvising that generally revolve around attentive listening and mutual respect between all participants. These qualities, along with the expressive freedoms afforded by free improvisation, lend themselves to the musical negotiation of various forms of difference, including not only musical and cultural differences, but also differences in physical and/or intellectual ability. Although the field of free improvisation has, until relatively recently, operated on the periphery of dominant institutions surrounding cultural production, it has been widely perceived as a form of art music that is performed and appreciated by a relatively small elite. In contrast, the admittedly

problematic concept of “outsider music” tells us that performance by self-taught musicians can be appreciated as having certain musical value even if their vocalizations sound melodically adrift, rhythms stumble, or are not anchored harmonically in a key.

OUTSIDER ART AND MUSIC

Over the past century, there has been growing interest in works of art by mentally challenged and/or self-taught artists—artists who have had little contact with the mainstream art world and dominant art institutions. In recent decades, such work has been frequently described as outsider art. There have been numerous debates among artists, art critics and professionals in the medical field about so-called outsider art. For example, Japanese psychiatrist Saito (2003) suggests that outsider art cannot, by definition, be effectively taught to other artists or to the next generation of creative practitioners; therefore it will always stay at the border of the art world, informing and stimulating it from the outside. Japanese sociologist Mika Fujisawa (2005) sees the field of medical care as being largely incompatible with received conceptions of art and the art world. She suggests that by conceiving of “art as an activity” rather than a product, we can focus on outsider art as both an example of contemporary artistic practice and as an expression of the social conditions of people with intellectual disabilities.

Although the concept of outsider art has been associated mainly with visual art historically, the concept has been applied to other forms of artistic expression, including music. For example, in the year 2000, American journalist Irwin Chusid published a book titled *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*, which examines the work of musicians who have created music outside of established institutional contexts. Chusid’s conception of outsider music does not depend on whether or not a musician has a disability. Rather, he focuses on musicians who are self-taught, those who not a part of the mainstream, and those who use musical materials that are widely perceived to be strange or unorthodox. Some of the musicians identified by Chusid have mental or intellectual disabilities, but not all of them. Whatever the limitations of the concepts of outsider art and outsider music, these terms have led to increased institutional visibility for artists and musicians with mental disabilities, including those engaged in free improvisation and music therapy.

IMPROVISATION IN MUSIC THERAPY

In the past, the actual music performed within music therapy settings has tended to be viewed as secondary in importance when compared to the music’s therapeutic benefits. Music is often seen as a means to a therapeutic end, even in instances in which clients have made songs and recordings in consultation with their therapists. As Kenneth Aigen states: “regardless of whether clinicians have based their practices on theories external to music therapy practice, or just applied them as a post-hoc rationale, their origins in non-musical areas of inquiry has meant that the musical dimensions of music therapy practice have tended to be passed over, minimised, or distorted” (2005, xv). In response to this situation, some music therapists have advocated for a greater focus on the specifically musical dimensions of music therapy. For example, Gary Ansdell has emphasized the importance of bringing musicological

perspectives to bear on music therapy, going so far as to advocate for “clinical musicology” as a formalized field of study (2001). A potential starting point for a clinical musicology is an examination of the actual modes of music making involved in music therapy sessions.

Music therapists have incorporated a wide variety of musical idioms in their music therapy practices historically. For example, Paul Nordoff focused primarily on tonal music, stating “though it’s interesting to listen occasionally to concrete music, electronic music, synthesized music, atonal music, and all the rest, it’s more important for us to get in our grasp the essentials of the greatness of the music of the past” (Robbins and Robbins, 88). In contrast, some music therapists have incorporated more experimental modes of music making into music therapy. Mary Priestley, for example, has used concepts associated with modern atonal music to enable clients to express a broad range of emotions, including those that they might not be able to access or express through a tonal harmonic language (1994). More recently, Colin Lee has drawn on concepts from experimental music, including those of John Cage, in order to develop new approaches to music therapy. Taking Cage’s “Sonatas and Interludes” as an example, Lee explains that by “expanding clinical repertoire these sounds could be invaluable in broadening a music therapist’s musical palette. Music therapists should always be open to creating new sounds and textures” (2003, 180).

In recent decades, improvisation has become an important part of many models of music therapy. As a practicing music therapist, I’m interested in free improvisation’s capacity to enable musical communication and creative expression among those who might find it difficult to express feelings and emotions verbally or through idiomatic modes of music making that are characterized by more prescriptive rules governing musical expression (and often rigorous and lengthy periods of study in order to learn those rules). Improvisation allows clients to express their creative energy in a direct way in the moment. Likewise, it allows me to respond immediately to a particular situation through music.

My approach to improvisation within music therapy is informed by concepts drawn from the field of “community music therapy practice.” In *Culture-Centered Music Therapy*, Brynjulf Stige defines community music therapy practice as “music therapy practices that are linked to the local communities in which clients live and therapists work, and/or to communities of interest” (2002: 328). He continues: “Basically two main notions of community music therapy exist: a) music therapy *in* a community context, and b) music therapy *for change in* a community. Both notions require that the therapist be sensitive to social and cultural contexts, but the latter notion to a more radical degree departs from conventional modern notions of therapy in that goals and interventions relate directly to the community in question. Music therapy, then, may be considered cultural and social engagement and may function as community action.”

Given the focus on community engagement, public performance is often an integral part of community music therapy practice. Improvisation has figured prominently in several community music therapy performance-based projects. For example, Stige has written about the work of a group called Upbeat that includes adults with Down

Syndrome (2002, 119-123). Improvisation was an integral part of the group's weekly sessions. Through improvisation, "the members of [the group] Upbeat gradually were able to coordinate their playing so that [they] could start to arrange and perform musical pieces" (Stige 2007). Improvisation also provided a conduit that enabled Upbeat to develop "a collaborative relationship with other musical ensembles, including several choirs and the marching band of the town" (Stige 2007). Building on the work of Stige and other community therapists, I too wanted to explore improvisation's capacity to bring together musicians from diverse backgrounds in the hopes of changing public perceptions of both intellectual disability and musical improvisation.

THE OTOASOBI PROJECT

The Otoasobi Project began in Kobe, Japan in the year 2005. Translated into English, "otoasobi" means "soundplay" and its concept is drawn also from *The Field of Play* by Carolyn B. Kenny (1989). The project brings people with intellectual disabilities and their families together with musicians, music therapists, and graduate students in order to foster a sense of community across social and medical boundaries and explore new forms of expression through musical improvisation. In my view, the value of musical expression has no relation to the degree of the disability, so we opened our call to anyone with an intellectual disability, regardless of their level of musical ability. Project participants with a variety of challenges (including autism, Down Syndrome, and Williams Syndrome) and ranging in age from 5 to 42 have participated in the project. We have collaborated with a wide range of improvising musicians including celebrated Japanese guitarist and composer Yoshihide Ōtomo. As of this writing, over 50 guest artists have been involved with *The Otoasobi Project* including not only free improvisers, but also pop musicians, butoh dancers, and installation artists. Together, we have presented over 30 concerts and public workshops with the financial assistance of the Able Art Japan organization (an association that supports art-related activities among people with disabilities in Japan) and the Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance company.



"Oto-no-Shiro", "Oto-no-Umi", and "Oto-no-Kikiippatsu"
video produced by The Otoasobi Project
<http://hdl.handle.net/10871/20756>

For our first concert, "Oto-no-shiro" (Castle of Sound), we used an old western-style house located on the mountainside of Kobe city. Multiple performances of improvised music took place simultaneously in different spaces in the house including corridors, the salon, and garden. As a result, there was no clear distinction

between performers and audience members: like the performers, the audience became improvisers in the sense that they improvised their own pathways through the house over the course of the two-hour concert.

Our second concert, “Oto-no-umi” (Ocean of Sound), took place at a concert hall located on an artificial island in Kobe. On this occasion, 27 ensembles performed in the concert hall and foyer for over three hours. Some parents and siblings of the group members also appeared on stage, performing on a wide variety of found objects including wine glasses, vacuum cleaners, and various toy instruments.

In order to prepare for these concerts, we organized 8 workshop/rehearsals that took place on Sunday afternoons at Kobe University. In the workshops, we tried various approaches to musical improvisation including performing in different pairings of musicians, establishing simple parameters or rules within which improvisation would take place, using traditional instruments (percussion, strings, wind, etc.) and non-traditional instruments (found objects, toys, and homemade sounding devices). Musicians and staff members met regularly to discuss the objectives of each session, and of the project more generally, and to reflect on the workshops, identifying issues and challenges as well as potential solutions.

At the beginning of this project, some of the guest musicians were apprehensive about collaborating with intellectually challenged individuals who might have difficulties communicating verbally. Likewise, some of the participants with disabilities found it difficult to interact with other members of the group in the early stages of the project—a few even hid under a desk during the workshop while others felt unable to enter into the room at all. In addition, some of the participants’ caregivers were understandably anxious about seeing their children on stage. Some did not consider the sounds that we created during the workshops to be music. This led to numerous arguments and difficulties in the early stages of the project. But as we worked together, collectively improvising our way through this new initiative, all of the participants found ways of interacting with one another musically and socially. As the children’s confidence grew, so too did that of their parents who were encouraged by the changes that they could see and hear in their children and by the praise their children received from the professional musicians involved and from audiences who gave the performances enthusiastic applause. All parents ended up joining in the music making for our second performance. The experience was transformative for many of the professional musicians involved as well. Several musicians said that through *The Otoasobi Project*, they became more aware of the communicative potential of improvised music and even developed new musical ideas as a result of the collaboration.

The results of our first and second concerts were documented on a live compact disc recording titled “Oto no Shiro” / “Oto no Umi”. In addition to the CD itself, the music on the recording was featured in the soundtrack for the independent Japanese film *German + Rain*. In addition, director Tomoyuki Hattori created a film titled *Sound to Music* that documents the improvisatory collaborative process leading up to the second concert.

Thus, *The Otoasobi Project* has been highly successful both artistically and therapeutically. It was important that our performances did not focus solely on the

musical expression of the participants with learning disabilities. To do so would have been to run the risk of our work not being taken seriously and/or being ghettoized as “disability music.” It was equally important that our performances were not based solely on the ideas of the guest musicians who have worked with the group. Instead, *The Otoasobi Project* has been truly collaborative in nature, with participants interacting with one another across differences in age, gender, and intellectual ability. Crucially, those patterns of collaboration and interaction have been facilitated by musical improvisation.

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