

‘Musical dialoguing’: A perspective of Bakhtin’s Dialogue on musical improvisation in asymmetric relations

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ABSTRACT

In music pedagogy, as well as in music therapy, the element of improvisation and free playing is often vital to empower and motivate. This article discusses Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue in such settings by asking what implications it could have on our understanding of musical improvisation in asymmetric relations (e.g. teacher/therapist – pupil/client). It suggests that it may be perceived as a complex social and relational event that is on the border, or, to borrow the words of Bakhtin (1981: 293) “half someone else’s” that becomes one’s own when it is populated with one’s own accent and adapted to one’s own semantic and expressive intention. This process, what is labelled musical dialoguing¹, remains influenceable and unfinalised, and contains not just consensus and harmony but also dissonances and misunderstandings. Also, both players negotiate and participate actively while listening openly and aesthetically to the voice of the other while at the same time doubting his/her own voice. In a reflective synthesis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000) a theoretical elaboration of Bakhtin’s texts (1982, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003) are merged with other relevant perspectives. In the discussion practical settings from music pedagogy and music therapy are referred to.

Keywords: Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogue, musical dialoguing, asymmetric relations, music pedagogy, music therapy

1 The expressions, *dialoguing* and *dialogued*, are mine. Holquist (1990) uses *Dialogism* as the title on his book on Bakhtin’s texts.

Introduction

The Russian linguist and language researcher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) is one of the leading thinkers in the twentieth century (Holquist, 1990). This author has for a long time felt that Bakhtin's set of thinking creates meaningful entry points to various musical practices. The present study picks up on some of these reflections by focusing on musical improvisation in asymmetrical relations in pedagogy and therapy settings. In this context 'asymmetric relations' refers to relations where one of the players is more of an 'expert', one who possesses power and authority, such as a therapist or teacher who plays to educate or help the other player, who is a child, a pupil, or a client. 'Musical improvisation' refers not only to composing in the moment but includes joyful playing on musical instruments and everything that is understood as musically intended within the situation (body language, gestures, mimicry, etc.). In the therapy settings, which get more space in this article, the term 'musical answerability' (Stensæth, 2008) is introduced. This term describes how the musical improvisation is formed through action and dialogue to allow the therapist and the client to become answerable to each other.

The elaboration has weaknesses. One is that Bakhtin's complicated metalanguage on dialogue is meant for language and people's use of language, and not musical improvisation in micro-settings. It is therefore necessary to say that the intention is not to reconstruct a full or correct interpretation of Bakhtin's ideas but to understand how his ideas can broaden our understanding of musical improvisation. Another is that the article can only deal with aspects of his philosophy, which are those aspects that this author regards as most transferable to the present scope of investigation.

It might be helpful to redefine what Bakhtin called 'text' with 'music' in this article. This means that text is understood in a broad sense – as any coherent complex of signs in dialogue, which can also be applied to music. Even Bakhtin (1981) said that language (verbal language) is only one of several ways that dialogic relations manifest themselves in the larger dialogue that is the event of existence.

The following research question is addressed: What implications could Bakhtin's dialogue have on our understanding of musical improvisation when the relation between the players is asymmetrical? Before elaborating upon the research question, the article starts out with a short presentation of Bakhtin's dialogue.

Bakhtin's dialogue²

Dialogue is a term that Bakhtin never finally defined but one he developed and changed throughout his lifetime.³ One might ask why he never defined it. One explanation, which Caryl Emerson talked about in her keynote in the Bakhtin-2014 conference in Stockholm recently, is that his ideas always resist a final definition. We know however that dialogue was a large concept of Bakhtin's time, especially in the German Marburger School, and politics (Marx amongst others). Bakhtin (2003) says he owes Martin Buber and other former dialogue-philosophers his gratitude. There are striking similarities between Bakhtin's dialogue and Buber's dialogue, particularly the way in which Buber presents the term in his book *I and Thou*. The largest difference is that to Buber, dialogue is not possible without imagining God, whereas to Bakhtin, who was also a very religious man, dialogue exists *between people* and *because of people*. This perspective pervades the most prominent features in his dialogue, namely relation, utterance, action, carnival and laughter.

Relation

Holquist (1990), the Bakhtin expert, suggests his understanding on *relation* to cover its definition. For Holquist, relation serves as the building blocks of simultaneity in Bakhtin's philosophy:

[It is] this *mutuality of differences* [that] makes dialogue Bakhtin's master concept, for it is present in exchanges at all levels – between words in language, people in society, organisms in ecosystems, and even between processes in the natural world (Holquist, 1990: 40, italics added).

This author understands that it is the personal differences merging into mutuality through dialogue that Bakhtin accentuates here. Relation, then, is the basis around which dialogue arises.

2 The word dialogue is composed of the prefix *dia-*, which means 'through' and the suffix *-logue*, which derives from the Greek 'logos' meaning 'words'. This indicates that dialogue originally connected to communication through words, which could explain why Bakhtin as a linguist chooses the term.

3 Slaattelid, a professor in Russian literature, refers to Tzvetan Todorov and his book, *Mikhail Bakhtine: Le principe dialogique* from 1981 where it is suggested that Bakhtin and his dialogue went through five periods of development from around 1920 to the last part of the 1970s where the first periods consisted of a phenomenological and a sociological period. After that came the linguistic period and a period in which literature history was emphasized. In the fifth and last period all four previous periods emerged into one synthesis.

Relation refers to many aspects of Bakhtin's dialogue, and the status he gives the 'Other' is especially interesting. In times when the Self and the organization of Self receives much attention within newer psychological and sociological theory, Bakhtin changes the picture by moving the role of the Other to the forefront. This is apparent in the following citation:

To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another with the eyes of another (Bakhtin, 1984: 87).

The image of an addressee is crucial. In fact, everything a person does is understood in relation to an addressee. In Bakhtin's imagination there are several possible Others since dialogue is seen as external (between two people) or internal (between an earlier and a later Self). Who makes the utterance in the dialogue however, remains unclear. Bakhtin puts the question this way: Whose voice is being heard? (Bakhtin, 1981) He suggests that although the voice belongs to 'you' it is not sure that 'you' own the meaning. Rather there is a complex interaction of voices and meaning going on.

Utterance

An essential notion in Bakhtin's dialogic universe is the *utterance*. Basically, says Bakhtin, an utterance is a unit of speech communication that cannot be invoked in general.⁴ It is *of* someone *for* someone *about* someone and is ineluctably tied to someone within a situation (Bakhtin, 1986). All utterances are *heteroglot*, meaning that at any given time, in any given place, they belong to a set of conditions – whether these are social, historical, or physiological – that ensure that a word uttered in a particular place at a particular time will have a meaning different from what it would have under any other conditions (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984).⁵ Bakhtin this way underlines how dialogue is always situated.

4 Saussure, to whom Bakhtin refers (and who he criticizes), makes the classical distinction between language as language system (le langage) and speech (le parole). The fundamental difference between Saussure and Bakhtin regarding language is that Bakhtin understands parole as a social phenomenon while Saussure defines parole as the individual part. According to Bakhtin all social utterances are social phenomena that express dialogic relations between persons. For more, see Bakhtin (1986).

5 'Heteroglossia' is one of Bakhtin's key terms. According to Holquist, "heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress" (Holquist in Bakhtin, 1981 p. 428). Heteroglossia suggests that *everything means*, by this meaning that everything is understood as part of a greater whole. Moving into a discussion on heteroglossia is going beyond the scope of this article.

Action

Something that is of particular significance in this article is Bakhtin's emphasis on *action*. Bakhtin claims that we cannot relate to what is within each individual, as if the psyche no longer is an inner phenomenon but exists outside and between people in dialogue. Action is what we have and what we can relate to (Bakhtin, 1998). A response, says Bakhtin (1986), requires action, not in the sense of problem solving, but in the sense of relating.

Also, action in dialogue happens between people who direct their attention towards each other. Thus in dialogue, action insists on a *co-action in joint attention*. Just as an utterance is directed towards someone, action in dialogue refers to being actively engaged, face-to-face, in a live situation (such as in a musical improvisation between two people). This means addressing another person through action, but also being directed towards the other in a *personal* sense.

One could ask how Bakhtin reflects upon body language, which is often prominent in musical improvisation. Interestingly, Børtnes, the professor in Russian literature, says that dialogue as a word relates to the Russian word *protivopoložnost'*, which in an etymologic sense means "dialogical opposition/resistance" (Børtnes, 2001:97).⁶ This involves being directed towards each other, not necessarily as opponents, but (again) face-to-face and includes therefore body expressions, gestures, and mimics. Such an image of dialogue is meaningful in asymmetric relations in music pedagogy and music therapy where one of the players lacks words (because of disability) or has few words (a young child).

Carnival and laughter

One last aspect, which is interesting to this article, is Bakhtin's notion of the *carnival*, which is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. The carnival creates the threshold situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. The carnival (and carnivalesque literature, as Bakhtin claims) creates a world upside-down, where ideas and truths are tested and contested and all demand equal dialogic status. Most importantly, the carnival brings the world close to us through its (serious) laughter:

Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As

⁶ I have translated the citation from Norwegian to English.

it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar; laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy (Bakhtin, 1981: 23).

We could say that idealistically, for any musical improvisation to become ultimately playful and motivating, the carnival is an ideal.

Summing up

We see that Bakhtin's dialogue in a fundamental way, and not just as words, intersects with life itself; it does not exist without people, their actions and interactions, and never without a situated context. Bakhtin's use of voices is apparent here. A voice has meaning within a context; a voice *means* but only together with other voices. Thus the voice of 'I' can mean what 'I' say (or vocalise or musicalise for that matter), but only *indirectly* since it is never solely responsible for its utterance and the meaning implied.⁷ Existence too becomes the event of co-being, which manifests itself in the form of a constant, ceaseless creation and exchange of meaning. Dialogue for Bakhtin, becomes a way to define a human being's relation to another human being. In fact, dialogue is not just the basis for existence; it is also its goal and purpose. In this perspective, a human being does not merely use language (or musical improvisation) as a way to express him/herself but also to communicate and to be *in* dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986).

Discussion

The question is what implications Bakhtin's dialogue could have on our understanding of musical improvisation when the relation between the musicians is asymmetrical? Because Bakhtin's dialogue is always open-ended, any attempt to be comprehensive about his principles is not desirable (or even possible). Nevertheless, to try to apply some of his ideas the article will in the following section discuss and synthesise practical and theoretical aspects. First, practical settings in pedagogy settings are introduced. Here the article refers to professor in pedagogy, Eugene Matusov (1996, 2001, 2009) and his notion 'community of learners'. After that, the article refers to therapy settings. Here theory from music therapy (Horgen, 2010; Tønsberg, 2010; Stensæth, 2010) and the term 'musical answerability' (Stensæth, 2008) is discussed.

⁷ Read about voices later on in this article.

Community of learners

Matusov, who is largely influenced by Bakhtin, uses the notion of 'community of learning' (Matusov, 2001, 2009) to suggest how a dialogic pedagogy can be practiced. For him learning is an issue that involves all of the people in the learning process, both the teacher and the pupil. Together they create a *community of learning*, he says. Through this community of learning the learning becomes an ongoing, unfinalisable and polyphonic project mediated by both consensus and agreement but just as much by dissonances and disagreement by those who participate. This is explicated in an epigraph of one his articles (Matusov, 1996: 6): "I know that I am wrong but I do not know where exactly I am wrong, to what degree, or why. I hope people who disagree will help me clarify these questions."

A music pedagogy setting

If we transfer Matusov's community of learning to a practical setting, for example to a music lesson where I was the music teacher who improvised music with a girl at an age around seven, it would indicate that I as the teacher cannot help the girl to accomplish a goal that she could not otherwise accomplish on her own. Basically I must see us both as *us*, as a community of musicians who both can learn, develop, and change. This is a basic mind-set. Next, to be dialogical in a Bakhtinian sense, a community of learning would also mean that I could not play for myself or simply together with the girl. The girl would not need me to accompany her musically or play along with her. Because her playing cannot be heard and understood as an isolated unit she in fact needs me (and the other way around) to influence her and her music in an inescapably intertwined way.

To better understand the complexity connected to the various dialogical relations that Bakhtin outlines, it is perhaps useful to mention his architectonic model of the human psyche (Bakhtin, 1993). This model has three components: 'I-for-myself', 'I-for-the-other', and 'other-for-me'. The first, the I-for-myself as a source of identity, is unreliable, says Bakhtin (*ibid.*).⁸ In fact, it is the I-for-the-other through which human beings develop a sense of identity. This I-for-the-other serves as an amalgamation of the way in which others view me (*ibid.*). Conversely, other-for-me describes the way in which others incorporate my perceptions of them into their own identities. Identity, as Bakhtin describes it here, does not belong merely to the individual; rather, it is shared by all.

8 See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin, retrieved August 25, 2014.

Returning to the context where I am the music teacher improvising with the child, the model above emphasises how each of us needs the other to become ourselves. The musical improvisation, even each single tone that we play does not exist inside us but on the border between us. The tone becomes the girl's or mine when it is populated with our musical accent and adapted to our musical semantic and expressive intention. Its identity belongs to both of us. This must not be understood as if I can only play for the child and not for myself. Empathising totally with the girl and her music so much that I silence my own voice would be a misunderstanding. The point is that we both need each other to define a *dialogic agency* in each other.⁹ The tone – and the music – is medium for negotiation. It is always half someone else's, to borrow Bakhtin's words again. Someone else's is either the other opposite or other consciousnesses we possibly could sense as being present (such as theorists, composers or musicians who influence our music, or relatives, friends who inspire us personally). Therefore, as a musician and a person I can never be fully revealed (or fully known in the world, as Bakhtin says) without the voice of the other.

In becoming dialogic, the musical improvisation creates a polyphony of voices and meanings.¹⁰ We need to remind ourselves that the way Bakhtin uses the term 'voices' is complex. For him, voices are understood more generally as discourses, ideologies, perspectives, or themes, and meaning-making (Baxter, 2011). Voices, then, includes something much more than a solo musical voice, or a tune; it is rather the interplay of those voices where also opposition, dissonances and misunderstandings occur. The musical improvisation can still be shaped and come to a finale, but as individual human beings we are constantly in an unfinalised process of individual voices. It is this unfinalisation of the individual voices that creates true polyphony. Truth (which Bakhtin refers to as polyphonic truth and/or true dialogue) is not a statement, a phrase, or a musical chorus played by one of us. A single mouth cannot express it, just like a single mind cannot express it. The voices carry (only) partial truths that can complement each other. A number of different voices do not however make the truth if simply synthesised. It is their addressivity, engagement, and their commitment to the context of a real-life event that distinguish truth from untruth.

The latter underlines the need for personal commitment and engagement in the situation where the girl and I, the teacher, improvise music together. For us to

9 Matusov (1996) inspires this section.

10 Polyphony also relates to Bakhtin's intertextuality. Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky's work as containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight within the novel (<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>)

experience the musical improvisation as dialogic and true, we both need to feel that the other player's music is addressed to each of us.

What about monologue?

An interesting question is: Is a dialogical mind-set always required in practical situations like the one described above? Matusov (2001, 2009) admits that, probably, it is not possible to maintain an optimal engagement in our pupils at all times. Not all learning (or therapy) requires dialogue mediation, and sometimes a more monologic mediation is even appropriate. Matusov (1996) says that monologic mediation promotes sharedness while dialogical mediation promotes heteroglossia (see earlier on). By themselves, dialogic and monologic mediations are neither good nor bad. In fact, it can be difficult to discern between monologue and dialogue. They both constitute aspects of any discourse. In some types of discourses, however, one dominates over the other. To learn how to play a scale on an instrument, to learn a skill, for example, or to understand the playing as a final response and not a stream of many possible utterances, creates monologue. When the teacher's response does not reflect the other's expressions – or the qualities in her expressions –, the mediation is monologic. Orchestration of dialogue, says Matusov (1996), involves mediation of issues of exclusion involving the participants' access to and comfort in the dialogue and its fragmentation. When the purpose is to promote, support, and deepen the dialogue, the mediation even becomes polyphonic.

Vulnerable relations and symmetrical positioning

Practicing a philosophy of community of learners involves, as pointed by Matusov (1996), deep personal care about and commitment to children based on sympathy, attachment, and compassion. This is even more important in asymmetric relations that are also very vulnerable (Tønsberg, 2010), such as in music therapy settings with a client who has severe physical and mental handicaps and a therapist who possesses (much) power. They are vulnerable because they create greater risks for misunderstandings and dialogical collapses.

Such vulnerable relations create obviously a poor basis for dialogue, and one might ask if Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue are transferable to them at all? Several researchers within the field of music therapy advocate for the use of dialogue philosophy, and especially in therapy settings that include vulnerable relations (Garred, 2004; Horgen, 2010; Stensæth, 2008, 2010; Tønsberg, 2010). They suggest that a dialogical mind-set is even urgent in these relations (*loc. cit.*). An awareness of a dialogical mind-set

becomes more pressing due to the risk of misuse of power. This author thinks together with Tønberg (2010), that the idea of a *symmetrical positioning* is both desirable and necessary. Such a symmetrical positioning requires above all that the individual with most power in the relation possesses an ethical and an aesthetical awareness.

A music therapy setting

What would the ethical and aesthetical aspects be in a symmetrical positioning in a music therapy setting where I was the music therapist who improvises music with a boy (15) with severe physical and mental disabilities and no words?

Ethical aspects

Ethically, a symmetrical positioning would first of all require the need to listen openly to the voice of the Other. I must first as the therapist, a) recognize that the boy actively and passively participates in Being, and b) see his uniqueness as given but simultaneously exists only to the degree to which I can actualize this uniqueness, as Bakhtin (1986) would say.

On a practical level this means that it is when I, the therapist, actually see myself as the potential Other for the boy that I illustrate how dialogue first of all requires two minds, not the same experiences (Stensæth, 2010; Tønberg, 2010). Yet, to activate the dialogical agency in both of us, it is essential that we both experience the mutual sharing of whatever is happening between us. As the therapist I must constrain myself to leave space for the boy. This is possible only if I let go and put myself into play for the boy (as in the carnival). To do so I must doubt my own voice to let my voice influence his. Doubting my own voice would implicate that I doubt what I know, such as knowledge and theories, imaginations, prejudices, wishes, goals, experiences etc. This doubting is necessary to welcome the boy and his actions and to focus on whatever he has on his mind. Only this way can I see the boy's resources and potentials and not his limitations and abnormal expressions.

Dialogue in this perspective is seen as the (inherent) "capacity of the human mind to conceive, create and communicate about social reality in terms of the Alter" (Markova in Tønberg, 2010: 46). This understanding unifies with Bakhtin's in that dialogue exists only in relation to other human beings, and that we are all born with a dialogical mind, which is reflected by other people's minds. Most of all this kind of posture calls for compassion and care, just the way a mother or a father intuitively would relate to her/his infant.

The task to position oneself symmetrically may seem obvious and simple but can in fact be extremely complex and challenging in vulnerable relations. Horgen (2010) says that practicing ethics in vulnerable relations demands that someone takes the role of the 'close other'.¹¹ A close other is one who relates seriously and with sympathy, attachment, and compassion (e.g. Matusov) to all possible communicative signals from the Other.

In music therapy utterances like an eyewink, a spastic movement, a tension, or an involuntary or accidental body movement are perhaps not intended as dialogue. As the therapist, and to create material for dialogue, I must however listen to them as if they were *dialogically intended*. Holck (2004) creates the term 'interaction themes' to cover what is going on in the musical improvisation in therapy situations with children with severe handicaps. She finds that their function is to promote *expectations* regarding the interaction, which this author thinks is the very spark of any dialogic agency. The point is that in time the boy experiences that I, the therapist, have dialogical intentions. He will then realise that his unintentional body language becomes a musical theme in the improvisation and a medium for interaction and intentional dialogue. A goal for the therapy could be to broaden the boy's communication repertoire and to explore new ways for him to participate in dialogue.

Aesthetical aspects

Børtnes (2001) writes about the aesthetical aspects in Bakhtin's dialogue. He says that to relate to the Other in a dialogical sense calls for an aesthetical awareness in the I-You relation. In this relation you and I face each other as subjects. This view contradicts a cognitive awareness where the Other becomes (solely) an object for learning, therapy, or research. Horgen (2010) picks up on Børtnes' writing and suggests that a goal for our aesthetical awareness is to become a true You, who hears, sees, and loves the other while doubting the I. Børtnes thinks that in the dialogue between this I and You, the I does not just appear as a random individual who is put there for the occasion, but as a loving and doubting personality (Børtnes, 2001: 103, see also Horgen, 2010). For a teacher or a therapist, this perspective involves developing a loving, engaging and "emotionally co-living" sense of being there for the other (Horgen, 2010: 13).

To explain the significance of the aesthetical aspects in dialogue, Tønsberg compares the positions taken by a participant with the position of a spectator of art: when Da Vinci's famous painting of Mona Lisa arouses our curiosity and fantasy, we start

11 The term 'close other' is used by several people in disability research (e.g., Eide, 2013; Stensæth, 2013; Horgen 2010).

imagining what her mystic smile could possibly mean. At the moment that we get engaged in creating the scenario behind the smile, we take the position of a participant and step away from the position of a spectator (Tønberg, 2010, who here refers to Nafstad, the psychologist). In the same way, says Tønberg, we need to take the position of a participant in the life of the other, not a spectator.

Tønberg (2010) even suggests that a participant position of the Mona Lisa painting also shows how aesthetic forms of expression are dialogic in nature. Perhaps this image is a simple but good illustration of another dialogic premise in musical improvisation in asymmetric relations? As a music therapist this author has often felt that the aesthetics of music creates an agent that takes part in the improvisation on its own terms, in the sense that the experience of the music unifies with the experience of the client. Aigen, another music therapist, describes something similar:

What is occurring is that I am becoming aware of the music as a unique manifestation of the client. The duality of person and act disintegrates and I experience the music as the person, not as the symbol or representation. I am living in the music in the same way as I am perceiving the client within his or her music, and while words can be used to later describe what occurred, the entire process takes place on a non-verbal, musical level (Aigen, 1991: 236).

Garred (2004), by studying Buber's philosophy on I and Thou, is perhaps more precise in his explanation when he points out that a musical improvisation (in music therapy for example) involves a human relationship *caused by the music*. He suggests that this relationship behaves differently from other relations. The musical relationship in general seems to be more vital, emotional and includes evidentially more bodily expressions than many other types of relations (without music).

'Musical answerability'¹²

This section refers to Stensæth's PhD (2008) in music therapy and her term 'musical answerability', which shows how applicable and valuable musical improvisation can be, not just to quicken the players into action, but also to engage dialogic agency in each other:

12 Bakhtin's term 'answerability' from his early works (see Bakhtin 1990) was later on exchanged with 'dialogue'.

Musical answerability is a discourse in which the action performers can describe and re-describe, agree and dispute, construct and contest their actions musically. As such, it holds that there is not such a thing as *one* meaning or *one* answer. Rather there is an orchestral polyphony of possible meanings and answers. In the sense that they interconnect, all meanings involved have the potential of conditioning others. They are heteroglot, as Bakhtin would have put it. To get hold of his/her unity of answerability, the individual must explore the meanings actively and authentically, but also with joy and seriousness (ibid., 252).

In her study, which elaborated the musical improvisation in an asymmetric and vulnerable relation between a music therapist and a boy (who was a 17 years old boy with no words and severe physical handicaps), a broad range of actions, such as movements (large arm movements, in particular), gestures and voice sounds characterised their musical improvisation. When the music moved the players (emotionally) it was easier for them to respond affectively towards each other. The aesthetics of the music helped them maintain a dialogic mind-set, so to speak. In fact it gave them both a feeling that the musical utterances were received and shared (Johansson, 2010). Basically, the musical improvisation created a way for them to relate and to become answerable for each other.

It became clear during the analysis of the material that when the therapist positioned herself symmetrically, the musical improvisation became more mutual in the sense that they both listened more openly and aesthetically to the voice of the other while at the same time doubting his/her own voice. Practically this meant that the therapist did not just synchronise with the boy's actions. She also introduced new actions to fit into their improvisation, and the boy clearly (and surprisingly perhaps) managed to take the role of an engager in the improvisation; he too expected the therapist to respond and to come up with new ideas to fit into their improvisation.

Also, when musicalised, their actions assumed a form, which was reminiscent of Bakhtin's carnival; they were freedom based, fragmentary, chaotic and paradoxical, even ridiculous and ironic and filled with what Bakhtin would name serious laughter. The musical improvisation was typically open-ended and unfinalised: both the boy and the therapist used the music and their actions to negotiate how to create new actions and new music and to keep the process going. Therefore, rather than complete synchronisation, the study found that the process *towards* synchronisation in the musical improvisation between the players was emphasised (since doing the exact same thing at the exact same time was not interesting).

Interestingly, when the musical improvisation between them sometimes became almost *too* stimulating, especially for the boy, it caused ambivalence, doubt and dissonances in their musical improvisation. However, because the players knew each other well, they also knew how much pressure and challenge the other one would cope with. They managed therefore to maintain a dialogic mind-set and at the same time avoid that their musical dialoguing collapsed. The ambivalence, doubting and dissonances created instead energy, interest and expectation (e.g. Holck) in them.

To mirror, or becoming identical with the other, did not seem to be the point in their musical dialoguing. Rather it was to uphold an interesting here-and-now for both of the players. This required balancing between harmony and dissonances, or what Stensæth lists as tensions between over-attuning and under-attuning, little challenging and too challenging, structure and chaos, rational and irrational, tension and release, whole and part, and action and intention (ibid.).

Conclusion

This article addressed the following question: What implications could Bakhtin's dialogue have on our understanding of musical improvisation when the relation between the musicians is asymmetrical?

Obviously, how we understand musical improvisation in asymmetrical relations, including the vulnerable ones, pervades our expectations regarding process and outcome. Bakhtin's dialogue creates another mind-set, which could enrich and broaden our way of reflecting upon and relating to musical improvisation in asymmetric relations. This author thinks that by keeping dialogue as an intention and as an ideal, the musical improvisation could turn into a potential arena where the players might become more responsive and answerable towards each other.

Indirectly Bakhtin's dialogue could influence our way of practicing musical improvisation in asymmetric relations. Its effect is realised if we manage to follow certain dialogic premises: first, the musical improvisation must be experienced as individual, unique, and unrepeatable for both players. Secondly, to allow for the needed carnivalesque upside-down situation, the teacher or the therapist must allow herself to try out the role of the Other, by leaving space for the Other and doubting her own voice. The positioning of oneself as a participant (and not just a spectator) is especially valuable.

As we have seen, the aesthetics of music is helpful in asymmetric relations, especially those that are especially vulnerable. When it becomes the element that initiates a (true) dialogic process, the music could create the difference that makes the difference.

Bakhtin's underlining of the significance of dissonances and discrepancies are especially inspiring, not just because these parameters are directly recognisable in musical terms, but also because these characteristics are often left out in our continuing search for agreement, consensus, harmony, and well-being.

Although it is difficult to transfer Bakhtin's meta-perspective of dialogue to a micro-perspective involving a musical improvisation between two people, the *symmetrical positioning* in asymmetrical relations seems to be in tune with his dialogic universe. The symmetrical positioning strives towards dialogical agency in the players and emerges with the experience of being able to take a space for oneself within a (dialogical space), sometimes with effort. It recognises the demand for both players to find their space in dialogue where they both is worthy being listened to. Thus, the musical dialoguing, as it is outlined in this article, seems to be meaningful in creating such worthiness and to engage dialogical agency in both players.

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