

The following article by Magnar Åm was the basis for his paper presentation under the UNeECC Conference in Vilnius 23 October 2009, where the main topic was “Innovation, Creativity and Culture”.

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Creativity and Resistance

- the difficult balance between freedom and limitation in creative processes and solution-searching activities.

Broadly understood, “culture” means what a species cultivates and develops through time. Dealing with the human species I can see an interesting tendency to invest creative brain energy for the purpose of easing the burdens of one’s physical life. Whether it be the invention of a primitive tool to augment the effect of our hands, the putting of another animal before the plow to obtain a better result with less sweat or the invention of the telephone to save us the trouble of walking to make contact with someone, the development of human culture seems to be driven by a general urge to make life less troublesome. It is as if we have in us a resistance against using more of our own energy than absolutely necessary in any situation and a mind always on the lookout for an easier way to obtain the desired results. In this respect the resistance is laziness and creativity its obedient servant.

But the problem in need of a solution is also sometimes a resistance of another kind: the threat of not surviving. This triggers creativity to find better methods of healing or hunting or nurturing. And in that case, creativity is an instrument for transcending the resistance and bettering the chances of survival rather than strengthening and conserving the underlying laziness.

Whichever of these two correlations between creativity and resistance I look at, it seems obvious to me that there is an interdependence, that the one requires the other; no problem without the need of a solution and no solution-search without a problem. The balance, however, between the two is what interests me; which of the two is in charge of the process. In the first example above resistance was, in the latter, creativity.

Now, I want to narrow the view a little. Through the ages there has emerged a field of human existence which has ultimately come to represent the normal content of the word “culture”: the spare time activities and the results of those, especially the arts; activities we undertake just to cultivate our own inner harmony. For my own part I am privileged enough to be able to work in that field full-time, although the purpose of inner harmony remains the same. One could argue that the fertile combination of laziness-driven and danger-driven creativity has brought humanity to the stage where some of us are able to live our lives with a spare amount of energy to be used of our own free will. And creativity has then, to some of those again, turned inward to focus on a less palpable problem to be solved: the apparent lack of meaning with it all, a lack of purpose, a lack of coherence.

So the creative arts try to solve that problem, or at least to contribute to making humanity more generally aware of the problem. They do so by being a mirror to the world, but a mirror that places the reflections within some coherence. And to some of the creative artists this coherence itself represents the vision of an answer to the underlying, existential question.

These artists, though, tend to be confronted with an interesting dilemma. Having fought a battle with the inner resistance of their not understanding existence and having come up with a creative answer, upon presenting that answer they meet another form of opposition: This kind of content is neither wanted nor sought after by the broader audience.

Do I see the contours of a conflict between the two basic creativity-resistance-correlations here? A conflict where the majority first and foremost wants creativity to be used in avoiding trouble, and where a minority wants creativity to help us remember what is troublesome but almost forgotten and to search for solutions to that?

In a recent research among audiences at different classical concerts in Norway Arild Danielsen found that as little as 0.5% thought that music's most important task was to be unpleasant (Arild Danielsen (2006): *Behaget i kulturen*, page 164. Norsk Kulturråd/Fagbokforlaget, Oslo.)

As a composer I know I will always face that dilemma and will have to relate to it somehow. I will continue to knock on doors behind which little or no interest is shown, but it is my comfort that I am expressing my search in a contagious language. That way I also know that the more people who listen for outside reasons, the more will be caught up and infected by the existential search that is hidden in the music. My greatest comfort, however, is that it does not matter how it affects other people, as long as it affects my own personal maturation.

I also find a great moral support for focusing so stubbornly on the issue of existential meaning in the writing of Viktor E. Frankl, who strongly argues that the search for meaning is not something undertaken when all other needs are satisfied, but rather is what actually gives people the strength to survive suffering. (Viktor E. Frankl (1962): *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. Beacon Press, Boston.)

1) Composing music: Seeking limitation

When I ponder the act of creating music by composing, I am well aware that it is the result of a deep unease inside, something hindering or limiting my full harmony. And because I do not know the exact reason for this unease, I start to express it in a language not too concrete, trying to give it a form, to make it possible to observe from outside, so I might in the end be able to understand it better. Thus the creative act becomes in fact a process of widening my conscious being.

I find an interesting parallel in what Johannes Brahms once said in an interview with the American journalist Arthur Abell about inspiration: "When I feel the urge I begin by appealing to my Maker and I first ask Him the three most important questions pertaining to our life here in this world: whence, wherefore, whither (from where, why, to where)?" ((Arthur M. Abell (1964): *Talks with Great Composers*. G. E. Schroeder, Publisher, Garmisch-Partenkirchen)

I suppose, that is another way of describing the inner unease, the existential, unsolved questions which creativity wishes to transcend. But also the sounding form itself shows that creativity is leaning on some resistance. In the emergence of a work a strange paradox appears: for creativity to be able to flow freely it is dependent on non-freedom. Because in the process of composing I will tend to limit my material to an extent that gives me a controllable overview of the work to be done and the time it will take to finish it. And the

limitations can be a series of tones, central chords, melodic themes, instrumentation, a performance room etc.

Since creating something is nothing but a series of free, interconnected choices put into action, cutting down in this way on the number of possibilities will make finding the right choices easier. This might, of course, be said to be my own surrender to laziness. But it could also be explained as the only natural way to give form to the formless. Because form is per se limitation. And there is no music without the kind of limitations mentioned above. In fact, each new, detailed choice I make in the composing process limits the direction and the final form of the music. So, when I try to express the fragile, impalpable inner unease as sounding form, the entire process itself will be a series of limiting choices, until I know I have come as close as I could to mirroring the source.

Creativity has thus been challenged by the inner resistance of a lack of harmony, but in order to transcend that lack, it has itself challenged new resistance in all the limitations of a musical form. This process is lead by my own free choices, and because of that I will feel that I am expressing myself through the process. The outer limitations of duration and where and by whom it is to be performed are all acceptable as factors that do not disturb my free will, because they are of a merely practical sort.

However, there is one important distinction to be made between the choices I make myself and the choices dictated by outer circumstances or by other people. Both kinds of limitation will always occur in the composing process. But the border-line between how much limitation placed upon you by others is acceptable and how much is not, is a delicate one to draw. All I know is that if I feel that my own ability to make the ideal musical choices is doubted or mistrusted by the commissioner of the piece, I will certainly feel less inspired to do the work. Consequently, if someone tries to make the artistic choices of form, musical material, atmosphere, coloring, expression and so on for me, I will be all needles. This makes me a poor cinema composer, of course, because in that world the film director is traditionally in charge of a great many of those parameters. And naturally, conflicts will easily arise when two arts with time as a main element have to collaborate. A lot of composers, however, still manage to subordinate themselves and do inspired work in the midst of these limitations. This also tells me that the right balance between freedom and limitation in composing is rather an individual matter.

Igor Stravinsky also sought limitations in order to be able to express himself freely, as he wrote in *Poétique musicale*: “For my own sake I feel a kind of fear when I, in the moment I start to work, face to face with an endless number of possibilities, have the impression that everything is allowed. If it is, both the best and the worst, if I do not have to meet any resistance, then working is just unthinkable. I have nothing to build on, and then it is just a waste to try.” (Igor Stravinsky (1945): *Poétique musicale*. Paris, page 32 in the Norwegian version)

2) Improvising music: Seeking freedom

Improvisation is a different kind of creative activity, more playful and momentary than composing - and more similar to everyday life. Although it is almost always also a part of the composing process at some stage, it differs from composing in that there is never a possibility to erase a choice and make another one instead. You always have to accept everything that happens. The only changeable aspect of time is the future. So, if something feels

uncomfortable, you have to forgive the imperfection of it and use the future to correct it and allow its meaning to be unveiled with the passing of time.

To me, improvisation comes from the same source as composing, it is simply more direct. And because of its natural acceptance of whatever comes, intrinsically it has a greater freedom in it than the composing process. Freedom is therefore often what I seek when I improvise alone; freedom to dwell on the formless without the demand of an understandable form as a result; freedom to create a coherence in time without the demand of recognizable repetitions and variations; freedom to surrender to my physical movements of the moment and their touch of the piano as a direct expression of the source.

So the biggest limit I tend to put on myself when improvising is that I must avoid letting thematic ideas become rooted. This kind of exercise trains my mind to stay focused on the inner unease and to never let myself escape into thematic constructions or consequences. Thus it becomes possible to have a mind that is more open to the moment, the here and now, and not be dependent on a future dreamt of. A sense of free flow is the result, and the sense of fulfillment. This sense seems extremely fragile. It is difficult to tell how much more limitation will be tolerated before I lose that sense of freedom and essence. I just know that improvising in strict frames like following a set number of measures, certain underlying chords, a certain pulse and so on, as often is the case in a jazz setting, totally wipes out my focus on the impalpable essence I want to express. Some limits of duration or character, however, seem acceptable.

I feel that in composing the two hemispheres of the brain act in a rather synchronic way during the process, while in improvising there is more right-hemisphere dominance, that is, more intuition and less conscious control. Therefore I think the former is apt to tolerate more of the defined limitations than the latter to keep the sense of creative freedom undisturbed.

3) Teaching composition: Limitation as a help to get started

In teaching composition to students who have never written music before, I have found that in the beginning there has to be a lot more limitation than freedom to get them dare to create anything at all. They have so little experience in setting their own limitations that confronted by a jungle of possibilities, they soon tend to become paralyzed. Therefore I have to design exercises containing clear and narrowing principles, reducing the number of possible choices and thus helping them to find their personal way through it more easily. The most important principle of them all, however, I tell them, is that all principles can be broken as soon as they feel for it. In this way they are encouraged to let their own intuition challenge the principles during the process, and consequently they acquire an increasing amount of freedom in their composing activity, at their own, individual pace.

One of the things I let the students reflect upon is the correlation between freedom and limitation. Here is a rather representative answer from their written comments:
“In the composition process the limitations should be big enough to make me wish to transcend them. Then I can choose to break them or be inspired to manage to express myself within them.”

4) Teaching improvisation: Freedom as a help to get started

In accordance with my own experience of the basic difference between composing and improvising, in this latter field I let the students dive directly into total freedom, the only limitation being the number of performers and the size of the audience. I meet them individually in a one-to-one piano improvisation, where each of us has a piano, and the audience is totally absent. Thus there are fewer disturbing circumstances. I try to disarm the situation and the expectations as much as possible, focusing only on an act where we both surrender to our intuition through our body movements touching the instrument and on the act of communication through this activity. We start then with silence and closed eyes. Whoever feels like it, starts. My task is to be a totally dedicated support to the other one, so that my inner security and experience can ease the brand new situation for him or her. The impact of these sessions seems to be essential on a personal and musical level.

I ask each student to make a written comment immediately after the one-to-one-session, just a few lines about how they feel afterwards and how the improvisation activity has affected them. Here are some quotations from these notes:

“A releasing experience.”

“I became both more relaxed and more awake at the same time.”

“A meditative experience.”

“I forgot time and place”

“I forgot myself and that I was playing.”

When everybody has been through the duo-improvisations, I throw them into tutti-settings with the same freedom and the same focus on communication as a guide. But here I also start to introduce the more social considerations implied in a musical group communication: the resemblance of an ideal discussion, where everybody balances the roles of talking and listening, so that everybody is ready and capable both of demanding attention and of being a supportive background to each other. Likewise there has to be a trust in the casual and a constructive attitude to it all, so that every happening will be considered a gift and material on which to build in the following seconds. These are all important conditions both in making a successful musical improvisation and for functioning well in a social setting.

The next steps of group improvisation involve a constantly increasing number of limitations to make them capable of bringing their right-hand brain hemisphere in to play together with their intuitive part. To train for this I start to let them improvise in smaller groups, then the music becomes more transparent and the need to follow up a theme and structure and character becomes more obvious. Very soon they are encouraged to give an entire improvised concert, consisting of small chamber pieces contrasting to each other, yet totally unplanned.

5) Innovative work for the local community: Give up or go on

I have had the opportunity to work with a local team to raise an innovative cultural centre. This work has proved to have a lot of parallels to composing music together. It requires the same amount of individual responsibility, the same will and ability to listen to the others in the group, the same common focus, the same open mind and the same understanding of the ups and downs of a creative process.

When we started out, we agreed that we had to follow the same path as when creating a work of art: first allow ourselves to be totally open and non-judgmental to the ideas coming into our minds. In composing music, it is crucial to be able to establish a state of mind that is merely receptive. When this attitude is present, no ideas will be stopped by different critical

considerations. Such considerations have to wait until the next step and not be mixed with the first one. Therefore in this brainstorming phase we gathered all ideas popping up regarding the functions of the centre and what it might look like. And this was really like a group improvisation, where only acceptance and supportiveness reign. The collection of contents was an exciting one with some hitherto unheard-of facilities.

The next step was then to try to bring things down to the earth and look more closely to see whether they were realistic enough to materialize, and then especially with regards to financing. This step has its parallel in composing through the process of choosing among ideas and using our critical sense to see which ones have the possibility to grow and interconnect in a complete piece of music.

With some considerable experience in individual composing I have become so acquainted with the two steps above that I can operate them simultaneously without having the one cancel out the other. But in the beginning of a student's composition practice and when a group is to compose together, I find it extremely important to raise awareness of these steps by segregating them. This is due to the fact that the first step, the open, receptive mind, is a purely right-hemisphere function. The latter, the judgmental, critical, practical consideration, requires a purely left-hemisphere focus. And most of the people I meet who have very little or no experience of conscious creative work are governed by one of the hemispheres, especially the left-hand, critical one. Then, if the right-hand, intuitive one presents an idea, the left-hand, critical one will immediately step on it and try to prove it hopeless. This same mechanism seems to be unconsciously at work in a group that is gathered to create something collectively. Therefore I am very keen to point out the two differing kinds of attention needed in a creative process and the necessity to let both be heard. And to secure the same power to both kinds of attention I let them at first be totally separated in time. Later, with training, it is possible to let them reign together on the throne.

The creation of the cultural centre went through practical stages of an architect competition, a winning design, an engineer's calculation, applications for financial support, contracts with investors and future users of the building. One of the future users is of course meant to be the local municipality. And since we live in a democracy, the cultural centre then had to be debated and discussed by the local politicians many times during the process from idea to materialization.

What constantly lead to political disagreements in this respect were mainly two things: the costs of the centre compared to the increasing economic needs in healthcare, and the question of whether such an innovative building was necessary in this community.

The first disagreement seems to arise everywhere in our country when a new, public investment within the cultural field is discussed. And it is naturally the nay's that raise the issue, as culture will tend to lose to healthcare; the latter is necessary and the former is not, which is common sense. To argue for culture against healthcare is a lost cause. However, should it not be possible to put them in the same category, with culture as responsible for maintaining good health and happiness, and healthcare as responsible for repairing what, in spite of culture's positive influence, went wrong?

This way of looking at the matter is still difficult to find support for in the political forums.

The second disagreement is rooted in a doubt about innovation. Does innovation have any value at all? And this resistance is a harder one to overcome, at least when it gains political power, as proved to be the case in our community.

The argument from the nay's was here that we have managed without the innovative aspects for as long as we can remember, and other communities have managed, too. So it would be a waste of money to go for it.

We lost that battle, and the cultural centre project has been put on hold. But we have not given up. Because it is so parallel to what creative artists meet all the time when they present something new: a kind of conservatism that assumes that only what we know from before is necessary, and that the only experiences worth seeking are the ones we have had before. I am not sure where this attitude comes from, but I think it is a kind of necessary scepticism that any creature in constant risk of being attacked has to cultivate.

Since the resistance we met was weaker than our creative urge, however, we concluded that we will do what any artist would have done: we will interpret the resistance as a challenge to put even greater energy into the materialization of the idea. We also found some moral support from other people's experiences with the long process of establishing cultural centres, both in the recent years and a hundred years ago... (See the quotation of Richard Wagner under the next point).

6) Conscious growth: aesthetic choices transformed to ethical choices

Now it is time to widen the view again. Because all the time I have spent developing my creative skills in connection with music, there has also been another development going on: the creation of myself as I want to be. And the more I have delved into the composing and improvising activity, the more I have been surprised by a conspicuous likeness between what music deals with and what life deals with.

As I said earlier, what pushes me to make music is an inner unease, and this is an undefined feeling that follows me wherever I am and whatever I do. It is not unpleasant, it is more like a purpose of living that is so difficult to grasp entirely that I feel forced to focus on it and to try to express it, for in that way to get to know it a little better. And I think it is no wonder that I choose to express it in a form language based on time, space and gravity as the main parameters. Because that is what life is like, too. The way I perceive living on earth, it is the timeless, spaceless, weightless spirit me being given the limitations of time, space and gravity for some reason. Maybe for the same reason as I am given the musical language: for the mere purpose of expressing my deepest truths? Then living itself becomes a language, a language bearing the same essential characteristics as music: It represents a basic resistance for me to try to transcend. In the creation of music I grab the unease, the lack of full harmony, and express that in an attempt to get hold of the reason why I feel unease; there has to be a memory of something behind it, some sense of harmony, otherwise I would not have felt the lack of it.

In life I would call the unease a sense of lack of freedom. Not that harmony and freedom are very far from each other at all. In fact, I would define freedom as the most important ingredient in harmony. And if there is a central correlation between life and music, then life could also be used as a creative language where what I create is a way of coming closer to what lies behind the unease. So, what is the material to be formed in that language? Wherein lies the expression? I would say it lies in the mere appearance of this creature me, how I act

and think and develop, and how I affect my surroundings. Thus, the “work” being created will be the footprints of how this life is lived.

Seen in this light, music could be a reflection of that life creation, offering an opportunity to watch one’s own life process and life search in the mirror of the symbolic music language to make it constantly more conscious. I must admit that I am very close to declaring that the formation of my life is my main objective here on earth, and that music composition and improvisation are simply the bi-products of that mission and the tools to understand it better.

In accordance with my own experience and that of the composers mentioned earlier, the vision, the dream of a future piece of music, is the crucial seed which in due time will become the work. Taking this principle into account, it would be of interest to know if it applies to life formation as well. For what has made me into the person I am? Heritage and upbringing is the normal answer. But maybe the main impact on my upbringing comes from the conscious and unconscious vision my nearest and dearest had of me, those persons I regarded as authorities and gave my trust: parents, teachers, friends? If so, these visions would certainly not have to be conveyed to me through conscious admonitions and punishments. A child is open to all kinds of signals: a look given, a tone of voice, a sigh, the movement of a shoulder, some tiny wrinkles in a face, and first and foremost the very example of that person of authority. And I think we all need to know that we are loved, and that we are constantly looking for a confirmation of it in our closest surroundings. Consequently, also a child would look for that, it would sense the expectations of its parents and try to please them by unconsciously living up to their vision, be it a positive or a negative one.

If this is the case, I think that when we have become adults, we can be our own parents and recreate ourselves consciously in our own image whenever we wish to, thus continuing our maturation for our entire time here on earth, appropriating the same technique as when creating a piece of music: by staying with an imagination of the future result until it really happens.

As an apropos to this I would like to site Richard Strauss from the aforementioned book of interviews by Arthur Abell, where Strauss says that he was “definitely conscious of being aided by a more than earthly Power” and that it was responsive to his determined suggestions: “I can tell you from my own experience,” he said, “that an ardent desire and fixed purpose combined with an intense resolve brings results. Determined concentrated thought is a tremendous force and this Divine Power is responsive to it. I am convinced that this is a law and that it holds good in any line of human endeavor.” (Abell 1964, page 146) Later in the same book, Richard Wagner speaks of the subject: “One supreme fact which I have discovered is that it is not will-power, but fantasy-imagination that creates...Imagination is the creative force, and this is true, I find, not only of musical creations but also of external circumstances. For instance,...I conjured up distinct visions of a special Wagner Theatre,...and lo and behold, it became a reality! My imagination created it. Believe me,...imagination creates the reality. This is a great cosmic law.” (Abell 1964:184)

I have started to teach such techniques to my students, like visualization, affirmation, meditative walking and hemi-sync-listening. The techniques appear to appeal differently to different persons, however. Some students have too hard a resistance within themselves to go on using them, while others embrace them from the very first moment. But anyway, I find

that as a teacher I can do much to reduce the resistance, so that it can be conquered by their natural creative urge.

One of the techniques I apply is intuitive group improvisation. There is so much similarity between some ideal social settings in everyday life and in improvising groups that I have come to think that group improvisation might function as a training facility for developing and improving some very important skills needed in a harmonious social life.

Musical group improvisations depend on some particular attitudes in order to function optimally. Thus these attitudes will naturally be cultivated through the activity. The skills demanded are as follows:

Tolerance: All persons have to accept everything coming from the others and from themselves. Nothing is a bad initiative. Everything can be of value.

Trust: All persons have to trust the help of coincidences.

Forgiveness: All persons have to accept every moment as a gift to build something from.

Support: All persons have to be ready to play a supportive role when others are in the spotlight.

Courage: All persons have to be ready to play a leading role whenever it feels right.

Responsibility: All persons have the responsibility of doing something as soon as they feel that this something is needed.

Positivity: All persons have to have the best interests of everyone and everything as their guiding light.

Coherence: All persons have to have the coherence of the improvisation (= the wholeness) as a main goal.

As you can see, these are all attitudes regarded as being of great value in ordinary social life as well. And it strikes me that it should be possible to transfer them to ordinary everyday life situations. Therefore I constantly remind students of this possibility when instructing in music improvisation.

Here is an excerpt from the essay *The Sum of Moments: Improvisation Modus* by Marion Løseth, a student of the subject Intuitive composition/improvisation and music philosophy at Volda University College. The essay is written in Norwegian, yet here cited in English:

“Life is a great deal, but it is not a result. Life is more like a journey. Or like an improvisation? I do not operate with an eraser in an improvisation. In fact quite as little as I use an eraser in life....When I give it some thought, I do in fact wish to have it all. For good or for worse. Because it is part of the temporary result, me, as I am just now, just today.”

(Marion Rodgers Løseth (2005): *The Sum of Moments: Improvisation Modus*. Volda University College.)

As it seems to me, fear is the main resistance that generates the need to create an optimal life improvisation. And as long as the fear is larger than the felt ability to overcome it, there is no driving force to conquer it. It is my firm belief, however, that working with musical group improvisations like the ones discussed in this paper could be a means of transcending that fear and helping people regain and utilize their creativity in their daily lives for the purpose of personal growth and meaningfulness. It would then alter the balance between the felt limitation and the freedom to create in favor of the latter.

Robert Kenny says in an article in the periodical *World Futures: the journal of general evolution*: “I believe that evolving one’s consciousness is one of the most creative acts

possible and that, as consciousness develops, creativity increases. Some personality characteristics of creative people have been consistently reported, including...independent judgement, autonomy, self-confidence, intuition,...high tolerance of ambiguity, and willingness to grow...These abilities can be developed through an ongoing program of reflective practice, individually and collectively.” (Robert Kenny (2008): *The Whole is Greater: Reflective Practice, Human Development and Fields of Consciousness and Collaborative Creativity*. World Futures, 64:8, 590-630)

In all of the situations described above, creativity seems to be rooted in some degree of resistance, some degree of limitation, some difficulty asking to be solved. Consequently, limitation in itself does not seem to hinder a creative flow. On the contrary, it rather looks like a challenge that strengthens the inner, creative drive. There seems to be a condition, however: that the amount of resistance does not exceed the ability to overcome it felt by the creative individual(s) involved. And this ability might then be called freedom, because it is what gives the creative individual a real choice between giving up or continuing the process. Moreover, it is my personal experience that the stronger the resistance, the more creative strength it generates; that is, as long as the felt freedom is still greater than the felt resistance.

As far as I can see, the question of freedom and limitation, or creative urge and the resistance against it, must be dealt with individually. It is therefore my duty as a teacher to approach each student intuitively and try to help him/her to achieve a creative balance of this their dual force. I am constantly seeking that balance in everyone where resistance is great enough to activate the creative urge, but small enough not to stop it.

Here is the goal formulated by one of my students: “The ideal balance between freedom and limitation is to me to have freedom enough to design my own limitations.”