

From body to sound: the influence of movement on piano improvisation (Summary)

1. Workshops: content, structure and elements (summary)

We presented workshops in South Africa in February and March 2025 in various fields, including music psychology, music theory, music education, movement improvisation and piano improvisation & movement. In this document, I focus on the workshops that were based on the connection between piano improvisation and movement. I summarise my report on the participants' experience of the interaction between movement and piano improvisation, and my own reflections.

The number of participants, group constellations and other conditions varied from workshop to workshop. The workshops lasted between three and four and a half hours and they consisted of different modules of ninety minutes each. The basic idea and structure of modules always remained the same. Adjustments were made, for example, by adding shorter additional tasks or by expanding the exercises to include freer collaborative improvisation with the elements that were being developed. However, these changes had no significant influence on the central question of my report regarding the extent to which movement influences improvisation. All activities followed the typical approach of Eurhythmics: 'from impression to expression', sensitising aspects of perception, strengthening social skills through cooperation and communication between the participants, and developing individual creativity and expressiveness.

2. Reflections of the participants: discussion (summary)

In order to gain insights into the participants' experiences of the influence of movement on improvisation, a reflection sheet was handed out immediately after each workshop. The participants had the opportunity to write down answers to three questions:

1. Have you had any experience of the relationship between music and movement?
2. How did your experience of movement influence your improvisation at piano today?
3. Can you imagine working with the relationship between movement and music in future?

As the focus of this study is on the relationship between movement and piano improvisation, only the answers to question 2 are analysed. The remaining questions are used in the final section to supplement and substantiate my own observations.

Most of the twenty-one participants were students with previous piano experience and who played at an intermediate to very good level – only one or two participants had not learned the piano. One group of pupils were around fifteen to sixteen years old. The musical backgrounds of the participants varied: some had classical training, others came from a jazz background. This stylistic diversity and the individual technical abilities provided a broad basis for investigating how movement influences improvisation behaviour.

The reflections were analysed using a qualitative content analysis. Frequently mentioned terms and topics were identified in order to recognise patterns in the participants' responses. Subsequently, superordinate categories were formed that served as focal points for the analysis.

Freedom of play and expression

The reflections show that movement had a direct influence on the over-all experience of improvisation. Many of the participants reported that they felt freer in their expression because the movement had influenced their thinking. Instead of focusing solely on theory and technique, many allowed themselves to be guided more strongly by their intuition and their representations of movement. They found improvisation to be less intimidating or inhibiting.

A related aspect was the dissolution of fixed musical structures. Some of the participants noted that they felt less bound by rules, musical laws or certain styles and instead found more space for personal expression. While improvisation is often associated with uncertainty – especially if you don't have much experience – their movements guided the participants to orientate themselves less towards traditional playing styles and more towards developing their own musical language.

Music from movement – access to individual expression

Most of the participants were familiar with the interrelationship between music and movement mainly from dance, where music often determines movement (see question 1 on the reflection sheet). In the workshop, however, they experienced the opposite: movement influenced piano playing and improvisation. The participants learnt to derive music from movement instead of being guided solely by conventional musical structures. This realisation enabled the participants to understand music not just as a sequence of notes, but as a way of telling stories and of expressing emotions, as well as of making movement sequences audible. In particular, those who had previously orientated themselves strongly on theoretical guidelines and mainly played from notated music reported that they played more intuitively through movement.

Movement also created a deeper connection between imagination and musical realisation. Many participants reported that they were able to store movement impulses and later realise them musically on the piano. As a result, improvisation was perceived less as a cognitive task and more as a creative, intuitive process.

Development of a personal musical voice

Many participants reported that the movements made them realise that music does not necessarily have to be created according to fixed rules or predetermined patterns. Instead, improvisation became a way to express themselves individually. Some realised that they were no longer just looking at music from a harmonic or technical perspective. In their improvisation, they were able to pick up on visual and emotional elements – like in a story. Movement helped them to translate images or emotions into music and thus develop a very personal sound language. This departure from conventional structures and the physical approach led to the participants gaining a new self-confidence in their musical identity. Some found this particularly liberating, because they often felt restricted by technical guidelines or musical conventions before participating in the workshop. Through movement, they realised that music does not have to follow a prescribed pattern, but that it can be an expression of their own creativity and individuality.

Structure in the performance

Several participants reported that movement helped them to perceive music not just as a sequence of notes, but as a coherent structure, and to grasp musical forms and patterns more intuitively. In particular, working with movement made them realise that musical sequences are often characterised by recurring patterns, forms and variations. Instead of concentrating on individual notes or chords, they were able to perceive musical coherence and thus shape their improvisation more freely and confidently. In addition, movement supported the participants in creating a musical narrative, and helped them to not focus exclusively on technical aspects when improvising.

Another important aspect was that movement served as an orientation for musical decisions. Particularly with regard to tempo, dynamics and phrasing, movement helped the participants to have a clearer idea of how their music should develop. They realised that certain movements are associated with specific musical qualities such as flow, tension or accentuation. This physical experience made it easier for them to shape improvised material in a targeted way. Movement also made the connection and interaction between body and sound clearer. The participants recognised that certain movement patterns could be directly translated into musical textures. For example, flowing movements were associated with calm, drawn-out sounds, while abrupt or halting movements were linked to short, staccato-like tones.

3. Own reflections and evaluation

After each workshop, I reflected and documented my findings. These written reflections were also analysed using a qualitative content analysis. I will focus in particular on aspects that have not already been analysed in the participants' reflections. My observations illustrate how movement works on several levels: it improves the group atmosphere, creates shared experiences and reference points, and ultimately promotes musical communication and interaction. The transfer from physical to musical coordination proved to be particularly valuable for joint improvisation.

Movement as a means of overcoming blockages

Movement proved to be a central tool for breaking down participants' blockages. By shifting the focus from cognitive processes to motor processes, the participants were able to improvise more freely and confidently. At the beginning of the workshop, some participants still showed clear signs of nervousness and shame (especially the teenagers), particularly when it came to presenting themselves in front of the group. This initial insecurity was alleviated by physical activity in a non-judgemental atmosphere. Physical activity seemed to relieve the participants' tension and contributed to an overall reduction in nervousness and feelings of shame. The movement enabled the participants to free themselves from mental barriers and enter a state of free, creative expression. I wrote this in my reflection: "One remarkable moment was a visible turning point for some of the participants: During the presentation of their movement sequences, they began to smile, walked up to the piano with new confidence and played without any signs of nervousness."

Relaxation and the joy of experimentation

Concentrating on movement enabled participants to free themselves from constant thinking and rationalising. This opened up a more intuitive and direct approach to music. The physical activity created an atmosphere of playful lightness and joy in experimentation. This effect was particularly clear during the workshop phases when the participants worked together in pairs or groups, and it became clear how immersed they were in the process. They interacted in an atmosphere characterised by concentration and the joy found in movement as they worked together on improvisations. The physical activity seemed to make them blossom – a change that was reflected not only in their movement, but also in their overall posture and expression. A decisive factor was the safe space that was available to the participants. They were able to experiment without feeling that they were being judged or observed. This freedom allowed them to unfold without pressure and explore their creative ideas without inhibitions.

A real sense of achievement

Over the course of the workshops, the participants' progress was clearly visible. What was particularly noticeable was their increased self-confidence, which was evident in their physical presence, as well as in their musical expression. The opportunity to show themselves and receive encouraging and affirming support from the group leaders played a central role in this process. One example of this was a participant who seemed very reserved and insecure at the beginning of the workshop. Thanks to the continuous encouragement and positive feedback from the group leaders, she increasingly gained self-confidence. This was not only evident in her movement presentation, but also in her piano playing, which became bolder and more expressive over time. I wrote: “During the workshop, I noticed great progress in her and the other participants. The combination of musical and movement improvisation enabled them to try things out, to surpass themselves and to develop their creativity freely in a protected environment.”

Improved group dynamics

My observations clearly showed that movement had a significant influence on group dynamics and also on the quality of the collaborative musical improvisation. Interactive movement exercises proved to be particularly valuable, as they relaxed the atmosphere within the group and created a positive working mood. This improved group dynamic had a direct effect on the musical work processes.

The joint movement exercises created a shared basis for musical communication, a common frame of reference within which all participants could orientate themselves. This shared experience enabled the participants to empathise with each other and respond to their musical impulses. The movement thus created a new quality of musical interaction. It was particularly remarkable how the non-verbal communication through movement was later reflected in the piano playing. I wrote that the participants responded well to each other and reacted to improvisational impulses. The movement exercises seemed to transfer directly to the musical interaction.

Movement created concrete common points of reference that served as orientation for the participants. A good example of this was the tactile circle with subsequent movement exercises. These haptic experiences created a collective point of reference that served as a source of inspiration for the participants' improvisations. I also wrote that the realisation of the ‘object score’ gave the improvisation an inspiring structure.

The shared physical experience with the objects created a shared understanding that enriched the musical interaction.

This summary was made by Hannes Taljaard in July 2025 on the basis of the dissertation in German by Alexander Okhotnikov which was translated by Hannes Taljaard in June 2025.

some of the objects that were used in one of the workshops



a few picture cards used in another workshop

