Original Researcher Article

Using Communication to Engage with the Audience: An Exploration of the Communication Skill in Jazz Music as a Tool to Engage with the Listener

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion presents an examination of non-verbal communication within contemporary jazz. My attention is directed particularly toward recent developments in composition and improvisation. To do so, I first establish a clear definition of "communication" as it operates in contemporary jazz, drawing on ideas proposed by professional composers. Analysing this definition allows me to uncover the intricate connections between expressive musical behaviour and communicative processes. The central argument put forward in this article is that strengthening one's musical ear directly enhances a musician's capacity to communicate. Ear training, therefore, becomes the most crucial element in cultivating communicative skill within musical practice. My interest in exploring this topic arises from a combination of academic, artistic and professional engagements. My own musical work is closely tied to the notions of expressivity and communication in contemporary jazz, and I employ these concepts not only as a performer and composer but also in my role as a teacher. As an artist, I continually interrogate what communication and expressivity mean in practice. These ongoing reflections have generated a series of questions and uncertainties that have yet to be addressed in the literature, and which I examine in the sections that follow.

Keywords: Jazz, contemporary, communication, non-verbal, cultures, personal language, experiment, composition.

INTRODUCTION:

I- What works define expressivity through communication?

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to how musicians communicate with one another. Monson (1996), for example, examined various perspectives on interaction within jazz rhythm sections. Her work highlights aspects of performer identity−such as racial background and political context−and places particular emphasis on improvisational exchange, a focus that aligns closely with my own research. Monson views the interplay among improvisers as a distinctive form of composition, arguing that these spontaneous interactions both reflect and influence the cultural communities from which they emerge:

"We need to start introducing ourselves as researchers to many people, and locate the musicians' fraternities and communities. Music-making communities go farther than races, cultures or geographic position, and this is what jazz improvisation does." (Monson, 1996)

Seddon (2005) proposes that musical communication falls into two broad categories: verbal and non-verbal. He conducted six one-hour rehearsal experiments with student jazz players, determining that each category encompasses three communicative modes−instruction, collaboration and cooperation. His findings suggest that non-verbal interaction plays a particularly important role in fostering empathy among performers. In a separate study, Seddon observed six jazz musicians and students over several rehearsals and a performance, documenting six hours of material. Again, he identified verbal and non-verbal communication functioning through the same three purposes: instruction, cooperation and collaboration. The non-verbal exchanges tended to elicit higher levels of empathy and were more conducive to creative outcomes than the verbal ones.

Alterhaug (2004) further examined communication through the lens of improvisation, considering how improvisatory processes can serve educational aims. His study situates musicians' communicative behaviours within broader fields such as cultural studies, anthropology and sociology. As he argues, "improvisation is the human practice from which all music derives; as such, it represents a tool for communication and interaction that seems crucial in a global context" (Alterhaug, 2004).

There are several works that relate the musician's expressivity to the communication process.

Palmer, Sloboda, Saul and Hathaway (2012) investigated how communication unfolds between performers and audiences in a London jazz club setting. Their study was based on semi-structured interviews with ten listeners and seven musicians. The aim was to identify which communicative factors contribute to a successful live jazz performance.

Analysis of the interview data revealed three central themes: the audience's energy−whether supportive or disengaged−the physical characteristics of the venue, and the expectations that both musicians and listeners bring

into the event. One of the key findings was that performers continually evaluate their communicative relationship with the audience, paying close attention to listeners' reactions and comments before and after the concert.

This insight directly relates to my initial research question concerning how expressivity influences communication among performers. The study ultimately demonstrates that contemporary jazz musicians often incorporate their awareness of the audience into their playing, using this exchange as part of their expressive vocabulary.

Another communicative element is the development of the personal language as a jazz musician.

Palmer (2016) examined how a musician's background shapes their individual musical language. Approximately seventy-five high-school and college students participated, completing surveys that assessed their musical experience, improvisational ability, aural imitation skills and familiarity with jazz theory. The study identified two elements as especially important for developing strong improvisational skills: the capacity to imitate and solid technical proficiency. Additional influential aspects included prior improvising experience, personal stylistic development, self-confidence and theoretical understanding. Palmer concluded that key components of musical expression—such as melody, harmony, rhythm and creativity—develop in tandem with a musician's experience, and that these evolving skills enhance communicative performance within an ensemble.

Sepuru (2015) explored the distinctive musical traits cultivated by six South African improvisers during their training. His study aimed to understand how their development differed from that of musicians trained elsewhere. Using semi-structured interviews, he encouraged participants to elaborate on their musical interests through themes related to practice techniques, musical upbringing, improvisational development and key influences.
The analysis revealed three central themes: approaches to improvisational training, sources of motivation and influential experiences—both past and present. The musicians cited a wide range of formative influences, including active listening, self-directed and formal study, family ensembles, transcription practice, church traditions, performing with many different musicians, imitation and the sociopolitical reality of racial segregation. Sepuru's findings show that both internal motivations and external circumstances shape how these performers understand improvisation and how they communicate musically on stage.

The study suggests that improvisational competence and the shaping of a personal musical language emerge organically rather than through rigid instruction. This development draws on formal and informal learning, foundational jazz techniques, identity formation and deliberate self-expression.
Although each musician follows their own path in learning to improvise, certain shared elements recur across individuals: consistent technique building, motivation, careful listening, disciplined practice habits and a distinctive personal voice. At the same time, Sepuru highlights that meaningful differences exist among musicians, particularly in how they acquire and express jazz language. His South African participants demonstrate training experiences and expressive qualities that set their musical voices apart.

Despite the breadth of research on communication and personal musical language, little work has specifically addressed how these processes intersect with expressivity. A central objective of this article is to contribute to this underexplored area.

II- GAP TO BE FILLED WITH THIS ARTICLE

This article investigates the expressive dimensions of communication among musicians in contemporary jazz, with particular attention to the role of ear training in developing these abilities. I contend that expressivity, as it relates to communication, has received insufficient attention in current jazz scholarship, and that cultivating the musical ear is essential for deepening both expressive and communicative capacities in performance. These two concepts—expressivity and communication—serve as the foundation for examining emerging practices within contemporary jazz.

To address this issue, I analyse how present-day jazz composers approach music-making through an awareness of communicative processes within the ensemble. Insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of contemporary jazz practitioners, whose reflections form the core dataset for this study.

In addition, I offer a practical exploration of communication among musicians by examining an original composition included in Annexes I and II. This piece was created to demonstrate, in sound, the ideas developed throughout the article. I detail how particular musical outcomes reflect the concepts discussed and show how the work itself emerges directly from the interview data, thereby providing a concrete response to the gap identified in contemporary jazz research.

III- METHODOLOGY

The process of recruiting to interview

As noted earlier, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather insights from participants. I specifically selected professional jazz musicians, ensuring that the information collected would directly reflect contemporary jazz practice. Because composition is a central focus of my work, it was also important that interviewees were active composers.

A total of twenty-two professional jazz artists based in Europe and the United States were invited to take part. All met the requirement of being either full-time jazz musicians or performers who engage with jazz regularly. Each was contacted by email with an invitation to participate. Nineteen agreed, resulting in fifteen in-person interviews and two completed through written questionnaires. The remaining two—Pat Metheny and George Benson—expressed initial interest but ultimately could not participate because of demanding tour schedules.

Of the seventeen completed interviews, two were conducted by questionnaire because the musicians were unable to schedule an in-person meeting. Although both granted consent, the format limited the depth of discussion. Without the opportunity for spontaneous follow-up questions or real-time interaction, the quality of these two interviews was noticeably reduced compared with the face-to-face sessions.

For most participants, follow-up questions yielded information that was more insightful than the direct responses to the primary interview prompts. For example, when discussing the role of communication in jazz performance, I often pursued additional questions tailored to clarify how each musician personally integrates communication into their expressive practice. Because concepts like "expressivity" can be abstract and vary widely among individuals, probing further was essential to uncover each participant's nuanced understanding.

Interviews took place either in person or through online platforms such as Skype and Facebook video chat. In one case, poor audio quality required further processing in Cubase to enhance clarity.

DATA COLLECTION

The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 67 minutes, depending on each participant's schedule. All sessions were audio-recorded. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, and whenever possible, I chose locations equipped with musical instruments so that participants could demonstrate their ideas through live performance. University rooms, cafés, recording studios and the musicians' own homes served as the primary venues.

As noted earlier, two participants were only able to respond through written questionnaires sent by email. Although these written responses still provided useful and relevant information, they lacked the level of detail that emerged during in-person discussions. This limitation stemmed mainly from the absence of follow-up questions and the informal exchanges that help to deepen and clarify participants' perspectives.

COMPOSITIONAL METHODS

My research is divided into two main components: a theoretical investigation and a practical exploration. The theoretical component, presented in this and related papers, analyses the full body of data collected through my interviews. The practical component involves applying the key themes emerging from that analysis to five original musical works, two of which are relevant to this article. These compositions span several formats, including a live jazz-trio recording, studio recordings using computer-generated instruments, ensemble studio recordings with live musicians and an extended eighty-minute improvisatory piece. Each format was chosen to explore expressivity within different jazz contexts, and each composition features its own combination of performers and materials.

Through thematic network analysis, three overarching themes were identified. The first theme, addressed through Musical Experiments I and II, relates to the question: "How does expressivity impact upon communication between players?" The second theme is explored through Musical Experiment III and considers the question: "How do jazz musicians understand the relationship between expressivity and improvisation?" The final two experiments (IV and V) relate to additional research questions concerning instrumentation and modal composition, but only the first two themes—and therefore the first two questions—are relevant here.

Musical Experiments I and II involved three musicians and a series of rehearsals designed to translate the analytical themes into sound. For these works, instrumentation included drums, guitar, bass, voice and flute. Both experiments serve as practical illustrations of the article's central themes. The overarching concept of communication is divided into two sub-themes: "defining communication," explored through Experiment I, and "personal language," addressed in Experiment II. Each piece was recorded in a jazz-rock trio configuration with additional lead instruments, and both were crafted to express the full set of thematic instructions derived from the interview analysis.

IV- Discussion structure of this article "Defining expressivity through communication"

The discussion begins by considering the importance of communication among musicians within contemporary jazz settings. I then examine potential flaws or disruptions that can arise in communicative practices. This includes an analysis of the figurative notion of the "ego trip," a term used by one participant to describe moments when a musician's self-focused behaviour during a solo undermines ensemble cohesion. The role of interpersonal factors—such as trust and friendship—in shaping communicative effectiveness will also be explored. Finally, I reflect on the broader implications and metaphorical dimensions of these concepts.

V- Other Relevant literature

To support several of the arguments presented here, I draw on the work of Kristoffer and Marchetti (2010). Their study examines behaviours such as variations in sound, sustained eye contact, physical gestures and facial expressions as forms of communication that emerge during performance. Although their research is not specifically centred on jazz, it provides valuable insight into key aspects of non-verbal interaction. Through their analysis, they highlight the importance of the concept "Belief-Desire-Intention" (BDI), which characterises performers who aim to create high-quality music and rely on communication to achieve that goal.

Davis (2007) also contributes to this discussion through her investigation of communication within a jazz trio. She identifies a range of cues and musical actions that support effective ensemble performance, describing musical interaction as analogous to a conversation between friends. Taken together, these studies emphasise that collaboration, interaction and spontaneity are central features of communicative exchange—qualities that are

equally fundamental to jazz improvisation and composition.

VI- DISCUSSION WITH THE PARTICIPANTS AND ILLUSTRATIVE MUSICAL EXPERIMENT I

Participants were asked to reflect on the importance of "musicians' communication." One response illustrates the general consensus among the interviewees:

"Hundred per cent, hundred per cent important. It has to be…" (Issie Barrat)

This emphatic view was echoed by several other musicians, including Jaume Vilaseca, Mayte Alguacil and Fabián Barraza.
 In relation to these ideas, the piece "Se Fue La Tormenta" (Annexe I & II) offers a practical demonstration of communication in improvisation. The section from 2:25 to 4:46 is entirely improvised, containing no predetermined harmonic or rhythmic framework. The music unfolds solely through the performers' communicative responsiveness, making it a clear example of expressivity arising from interaction.

Communication within a jazz ensemble can be understood as a collaborative effort. When musicians play in an overly individualistic or disconnected manner, the result is often musical instability:

"I think that's how jazz breathes. Sometimes when you hear younger musicians, there is the playing over the top of the kind of music. It sounds like the rhythm section is playing and they are soloing separately. I think that everything has to be together." (Kevin Mackencie)

Kevin's words highlight the essential balance between personal expression and attentive listening. Effective improvisation relies on interaction, focused listening and creative freedom—three elements that Frisk and Östersjö (2013) also identify as necessary for maintaining stylistic coherence.

The importance of cohesion becomes audible in "Musical Experiment I." Between 2:55 and 3:10, one instrument briefly disrupts the ensemble's fluidity. During this moment, the bassist diverges from the shared musical direction established by the guitarist and drummer, creating a temporary breakdown in communication.

Kevin also noted that sound-based cues often outweigh visual or verbal signals:

"There also has to be an interaction so that it has a groove or a swing to the music. If there is one who is a bit off the band, not working with the other bits of the band, it just doesn't set as a whole thing. It's nice to make eye contact and communicate that, but most of the time is focusing on listening to something rather than…" (Kevin Mackencie)

Many contemporary jazz composers likewise connect communicative skill to lived experience. Central to this is the role of the musical ear, which several studies now describe not as a passive organ but as an active participant in music-making. From a psychoacoustic perspective, the ear can be considered an "instrument" itself (Connolly, 2015). Because communicative expressivity in jazz depends heavily on listening, ear training becomes a foundational element of the communicative process.

A concept frequently mentioned in the interviews is the expressive "ego trip." This informal phrase captures what happens when an improviser stops listening to the ensemble and plays material disconnected from the group's musical direction. Although colloquial, the term vividly describes a breakdown in communicative flow:

"If it's your turn to do a solo, but at that time you've got enough material from the rest of the musicians to be able to…, you know, get something… I reckon that... I mean, you see people going off on an ego trip, don't you? 'Where the hell did that come from?' you know? What is he doing? And I hate it." (Bill Fultone)

"Ego trip" is ultimately subjective, yet its occurrence depends on each musician's expressive awareness and their capacity to respond to others. The better trained the musical ear, the more readily a player can avoid—or repair—such communicative disruptions.

Two examples in "Se Fue La Tormenta" illustrate these issues. Between 2:55 and 3:10, despite coordination between the guitarist and drummer, the bassist momentarily disengages, producing a tense and unstable passage. A similar moment occurs from 3:57 to 4:10, when the bassist again pursues an isolated idea. Although the guitarist and drummer attempt to respond initially, the ensemble eventually drops into complete disconnection for several seconds. Still, these moments demonstrate that even when communication falters, the ensemble tends to re-establish cohesion, creating a new unified section after the disruption.

Trust also plays a crucial role in musical communication. As one participant observed:

"…and this idea of a stable group appeals to me; always working with a very good team. People that you know and you enjoy playing with. Lately, I can see many bands that are considering and doing this with their bands, consisting in keeping the same people in the band and making a trusting group…, then composing music, recording albums, playing gigs, now sharing moments, then thinking together…, and finishing by becoming real friends." (Jaume Vilaseca)

While some historical jazz bands maintained stable memberships, others rotated musicians frequently (Filippova et al., 2012). This variety raises a key question: does familiarity among musicians lead to more synchronised and communicative performances? When performers do not know each other, issues such as forced spontaneity, reduced comfort and less fluid expression often arise.

"Musical Experiment I" highlights how friendship enhances communication. The musicians had been playing together for a year, and their close relationship is reflected in the cohesiveness of the recording. The idea of "musical friendship," mentioned by Jaume, describes

how social bonds can reinforce expressivity and articulate new musical possibilities.

By contrast, "Musical Experiment II" shows the opposite. From 0:48 to 1:55, the flute solo does not align with the intentions of the rhythm section, likely due to the soloist's unfamiliarity with the other musicians.

Another participant expressed the necessity of communication succinctly:

"Absolutely vital." (Felicity Gorst)

Seddon (2005) similarly emphasises that communication within a jazz band relies on empathic creativity, grounded in what he calls emphatic intelligence—essentially, understanding what fellow musicians aim to express.

One interviewee noted that certain players naturally take on leadership roles in communication:

"The double bass needs to pay attention to what the soloist is doing. If the soloist is playing a scale or different substitution in a specific moment, the double bassist needs to know that the soloist needs that." (Fabián Barraza)

From this perspective, the soloist often functions as the ensemble's leader, with the rest of the band responding accordingly. Berliner (1994) likewise identifies call-and-response, rhythmic interplay, imitation and phrase-filling as essential mechanisms sustaining ensemble cohesion.

Several passages in "Se Fue La Tormenta" reflect this dynamic.
· From 2:48 to 2:54, the bassist establishes a motif that the guitarist imitates, while the drummer provides rhythmic   grounding.
· From 3:30 to 3:54, guitar and bass engage in a question-and-answer exchange, eventually drawing the drummer into a shared, synchronised climax.
· From 4:12 to 4:30, leadership temporarily shifts to the guitarist, who introduces a harmonic texture that the group collectively adopts.

These moments demonstrate how leadership can shift fluidly among players, shaping the ensemble's expressive direction.

This discussion concludes with Fabián's reflection on the fundamental nature of communication in jazz:

"From 10 people that are listening to the concert, only three will know what jazz is about. If the magic does not happen is because there is no communication between the musicians. If you play with paper, you depend completely on the paper. Jazz was born from a type of communication between people."

VII- CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined how musicians communicate with one another and explored different interpretations of this interpersonal process. I have also compared effective and ineffective communicative behaviours within jazz performance, allowing the contrasting strengths and weaknesses of each to become clear.

The discussion highlights a strong connection between communication and ear training: the more refined a musician's listening skills, the more easily they can interact musically with others. A recurring issue raised by participants is the "ego trip," a tendency for soloists to drift away from the ensemble's shared direction. Such moments of miscommunication can disrupt collective expressivity, often because one performer becomes detached from the group's intentions.

The level of familiarity among musicians also influences expressive outcomes. "Friendship" emerged as a central factor, with interviewees frequently noting that strong personal relationships provide a foundation for successful musical communication. Ensembles formed through long-term collaboration behave differently—and often more cohesively—than groups of musicians who do not know one another well.

It is also essential to recognise how musical expression moves from the soloist to the rest of the band. Some researchers argue that the interaction within the rhythm section is just as crucial as the communication between the soloist and the ensemble, and that both forms depend heavily on the musicians' listening abilities. Drawing on the perspectives of my participants, I conclude that in contemporary jazz performance, every musician holds an equally vital—though distinct—communicative and expressive role.

VIII- Annexes

Annexe I: Compositions

Composer: Jorge Pallarés Catalán

Musical piece "Musical Experiment I": Se fue la tormenta

Translation: The storm is gone

Link to the song:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7hXA_iSvGM

Musical piece "Experiment II": Recuerdos

Translation: Memories

Link to the song: Classically trained soloist version:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oNKMNBLGpU

Link to the song: Jazz trained soloist version:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyWlw_X8HfI

The songs "The Storm Is Gone" and "Memories" for this paper have been created in a jazz-rock trio band format. The players were instructed to think about: "communication, exaggerated communication with each other". I kept the players of these pieces unaware of this article's aims and I gave them only the instructions above. This concept achieved the greatest prominence during the free-jazz section of the first mentioned song, from 2:25 to 4:46, and after 1:49 of the second song "Memories", where the musicians are immersed in a total improvisation with no rules.\

ANNEXE II: SCORES

Musical piece "Musical Experiment 1" : Se fue la tormenta

Translation: The storm is gone

2

Se fue la tormenta
(The storm is gone)

B♭maj7　　C9　　Gm9　　Gm9

B♭maj7　　C9　　Gm9　　Gm9

B♭maj7　　C9　　E♭9　　D9　　**D.S. al Coda**

(A) Melody 2nd Chorus
Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9　Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9

Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9　Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9

(A) Melody 3rd Chorus
Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9　Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9

Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9　Gm7　Fmaj13　E♭9　D9

- AFTER 2ND CHORUS

- Aprox. 2 minutes of FREE IMPROVISATION informed by the tune

- Then CONTINUING SOLO over (bar 13 to 28) then over (B)(A)(B)

- Then 3rd CHORUS from 𝄋 to 𝄌 (with repeats)

- Then INTRO (bars 1 to 4) x 2

- Then SOLO OUTRO over (bars 5 to 8) x6

- END WITH [Eb9 I D9]

Musical piece "Musical Experiment II" : Recuerdos

Translation: Memories

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