

# MUSICAL IMPROVISATION AS A TYPE OF ACTION

*Silvana K. Figueroa*

University of Konstanz, Germany

## Background

The aim of my presentation is to reflect upon musical improvisation from the perspective of the sociological theory of action, which has in the past tended to conceive of the notion of human action as a rational „composed“, conscious type of human behaviour which is meaningful for the subject and which works according to the principle of a goal-means-scheme.

## Aims

My paper will demonstrate that this conception of action is not sufficient for an understanding of how we act.

## Main contribution

Musical improvisation can be defined as the simultaneous composition and execution of music; one of its fundamental characteristics is its contrast to the principles of construction and rational planning which dominate the traditional idea of composition in western music. The improviser

typically plays in an „unprepared“ and spontaneous way, which is the defining feature of improvised music: its absence of predetermination. I will examine the main characteristics of improvising in music to demonstrate that there are other types or aspects of human action that have been neglected in the social theory of action, despite its potential fruitfulness as a means of understanding spontaneity or creativity in our behavior.

## Implications

Gaining a deeper knowledge of musical improvisation has decisive consequences for the sociological theory of action, especially in the following fields: 1) in the conflict between deterministic theories of action that emphasize the (socially) learned patterns anchored in how human action is carried out vs. theories of action that emphasize human freedom and spontaneity in order to explain human behaviour; 2) in terms of the presence and weight of rationality in (the theory of) action; 3) in the classic question regarding the emergence of novelty and spontaneity in human action.