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How to Develop Aural-Improvisational Powers in Higher Music Education: Pedagogical and Philosophical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what it means to develop aural-improvisational abilities, what we call "powers," in higher music education. Co-written by a philosopher and a jazz pedagogue/musician, the article illuminates and argues in favor of two methods that we believe are well-suited for developing young people's aural-communicative capacities and elaborates on theoretical perspectives that fit with musical learning. The first method is developed by Njål Ølnes and is a practice for aural-communicative ensemble learning. We provide novel qualitative data on how this method works, based on a postdoctoral research project in the field of artistic and practice-based research, with the ensemble serving as both the primary context and object of inquiry. The second method is the aural imitation method, used and praised by multiple professional jazz musicians worldwide. We develop a theoretical framework informed by philosophical hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer and a Gadamerian reading of Kant), developmental psychology, and enactivism. Along the way, we critique two approaches within contemporary music education: the building block approach and the stepping-stone approach.

Keywords: *improvisation, higher education, aural learning, communicative musicality, enactment, reflective judgment*

Across the spectrum of idioms associated with contemporary improvised music, the core of improvisational power seems to be the capacity to unfold complex musical meaning spontaneously, either alone or in bands (Bailey 1993; Berliner 1994; Monson 1996; Schroeder 2018; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022; Wilf 2014). But how should this aural competence be conceptualized? For full-fledged aural musicians, the question might seem redundant. They possess a form of knowledge that does not need a theoretical perspective, as auditory, musical, and communicative competence is an eidetic alternative in its own right (Sidran 1981). But in music education, the question soon becomes critical. Theory and pedagogical practice merge in this question: How can young people be initiated into a mode of knowledge suited to aural-communicative improvisation?

This article is co-written by a philosopher (and former music student and musician; Mattias Solli) and a jazz musician and music educator (Njål Ølnes). We choose to speak of improvisational *powers* rather than *abilities* or *skills*, as it better captures the depth and generative potential we attribute to aural-improvisational engagement, not least in light of Immanuel Kant's concept of reflective judgment (2000), which will be explained below. The article is the result of many years of collaboration, grounded in a dialectical relationship between musical practice—which, in an important sense, holds primacy—and philosophical reflection on communicative action. We will illuminate and argue in favor of two methods that we believe are well-suited to developing people's aural-communicative skills and elaborate on theoretical perspectives that fit with musical learning.

The first method is called *aural-communicative ensemble learning*. With novel qualitative data from aural learning and teaching activities, we suggest that aural-communicative ensemble learning explores and expands students' ways of organizing foreground/background structures during musical participatory sense-making. Each student ensemble member is assigned individual tasks selected from a set of nine roles (which we call the 9Rs), developed to target distinct ways of temporally foregrounding specific musical qualities. The data was gathered at the Jazz Programme at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), where Njål currently teaches and previously studied as a young student. Mattias is not formally

affiliated with the program at present but studied at the institution and has published articles in collaboration with (now retired) key faculty members from the program (Erling Aksdal and John Pål Inderberg; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022; as well as Bandlien, Solli, and Aksdal 2025; Solli, Finke, and Aksdal 2025).

The other method is the *aural imitation method*. While this method is also used in the NTNU Jazz Programme, it is, more importantly, one of the most praised practices among professional jazz musicians (Berliner 1994; Galper 2012; Green 2001; Monson 1996; Schroeder 2018; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022; Wilf 2014). Although practiced differently around the globe, the aural imitation method typically means acquiring musical languages by minute embodied replication of recorded music, namely learning rhythm, melody, harmony, and stylistic nuances *by ear* and *by enactive imitative replication*. As musician and pedagogue Hal Galper (2001) puts it, "You copy and imitate, and try to sound 'like that' as much as possible" (unpaginated interview). The students sing, clap, and stamp along with the music, thus mapping it out as precisely as they can *with their bodies* before gradually using the musical instrument and eventually varying the music spontaneously and creatively. The aural imitation method originated in the informal jazz tradition (Sidran 1981) and is today recognized as a potent practice for developing musical-communicative skills independently of style or idiom. This trans-idiomatic and inclusive potential is in focus in this article.

Admittedly, juxtaposing the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning on equal footing is artificial. While the former is a practice for fundamental musical learning, used and developed by numerous people throughout history, the latter is a specific university methodology developed by one teacher. Besides, comparing the two is like comparing organic learning of a mother tongue with adolescents learning how to improvise slam poetry: *the second presupposes the first*. Having said that, viewed together, the two practices can and will illustrate a holistic learning process that follows the student from individual to collective accomplishments in music. We will view aural-communicative ensemble learning as a prolongation of the aural imitation method.

Parts and Wholes

But why do we need to voice this? Mainly because the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning do not fit into dominating views on jazz improvisation and education. A reader consulting the vast and heterogeneous literature on jazz improvisation soon encounters what Mattias Solli, Erling Aksdal, and John Pål Inderberg (2021, 2022) have called the "building block approach." The building block approach conceives musical improvisation as a combining, recombining, and rearranging of component units (Benson 2003; Berliner 1994; Nettl 1974; Prouty 2004; Wilf 2012, 2014, 2017). The building blocks can also go by other names, such as *chunks*, as exemplified by guitarist Stein Helge Solstad (2015): "*Chunking* entails grouping small information units into *chunks*; these can then be combined into larger, hierarchically constructed systems and function as a mental 'store' from which the performer retrieves material during improvisation" (1, emphasis original; see also Solstad, 2020).

The building block approach naturally impacts how one models the learning process pedagogically. To the extent that competence can be broken down into the handling of discrete elements, it can seemingly also be built by acquiring these same elements (Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2022). The building block approach may work perfectly when fluent jazz musicians discuss music and demonstrate what they hear to students. However, it is worth noting that "block" can also be a problematic metaphor for describing music—or at least one that, in certain contexts, may lead to an oversimplification of musical content. *Blocks* associate static, object-like items with tangible and visible surfaces piled on each other. Whether the word is used or not, the idea that music can be divided into parts and then assembled and *re*-assembled is a figure that easily supports a reified conception of music (Ølnes 2025), that is, a conception that handles music as mental objects ready to be analyzed theoretically, more than an approach acknowledging that the music is felt and understood by the moving and communicating body. While this may be the prevailing way of thinking in many institutional settings, the reification of music can easily lead to an institutional ignorance of the effort and time required to properly learn music by ear (Solli and Engen 2025). Musical content that may seem easy to grasp theoretically—such as a ii–V cadence—can be much more challenging when it comes to actually hearing the multiple tonal pathways

potentially embedded in the cadence. Consequently, if speed and theoretical knowledge are valued most, the often time-consuming effort of aural learning may not be prioritized, either personally or institutionally.

Additionally, the building block approach seems to be closely aligned with a linear and normative stepping-stone approach to learning. Kenneth Prouty (2004) documents this approach in his analyses, although he does not employ the same classification used here. He shows how jazz curricula and pedagogy launch the students in typical course progression from "Beginning improvisation" and "Introduction to improvisation" to "Advanced improvisation," typically with repertoire based on a hierarchy of relative harmonic difficulty, with harmonically simpler pieces being placed at the beginning of the instructional sequence. In the building block approach, students often begin with blues-based or modal tunes, gradually integrating more complex harmonic progressions (Prouty 2004). In this approach, *before* a jazz student can move into more independent and personal musical exploration, they need to go through a stepping-stone process of learning the fundamental building blocks formalized into a college syllabus by the institution. If autonomous creativity is a goal for the individual student, they need to go through pre-selected musical examples from the past as stepping-stones leading linearly up to this goal (see, for example, Berliner 1994; Hargreaves 2014; Solstad 2020; Wilf 2014).

The problem with the stepping-stone approach, as we see it, is that when applied rigidly and normatively, it can easily limit the space for the powerful, holistic, and joyful experiences that music can offer. As Galper (2013) points out in his YouTube video, *What is practicing? Masterclass with Hal Galper*, "When you are attracted to a particular artist, there is a reason for it. There's a resonance that has been created between you and that artist. You respond emotionally and psychologically to that music." We will argue that it is in the perceived totality of the music and personal resonance that students will find music's full meaning and power, not in the divisions and preconceptions introduced by the building block approach and the associated stepping-stone approach. Indeed, we believe that a holistic and open-ended approach to music is vital to releasing as much as possible of the humanistic potential of music within the context of music education. The ultimate outcome of music education should be human growth in the fundamental sense

associated with a non-instrumental and holistic conception of *Bildung*. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) offers that *Bildung* is the ongoing and dynamic process of "keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view" (15). The concretized and specific yet open-ended musical approaches embedded in the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning are effective ways to develop skills associated with good musicianship in profound and holistic senses. These methods foster openness and sensitivity towards others and their musical expressions. But then again, these outcomes cannot be ordered or forced—only facilitated and stimulated.

We do, however, agree with the proponents of the building block approach on the critical need to learn from others. As Eitan Wilf (2014) rightly put it: "[musical] improvisation is not a creation ex nihilo" (165). *No* musician can invent their own medium of musical expression. They *always "*build" on what others have heard and played before. However, the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning cannot be properly described as an accumulation of building blocks (in whatever form) or framed within linear and normative stepping-stone approaches to musical learning. Put simply, we believe these methods effectively support the development of young people's aural communication powers. But they do not fit into the views that dominate much of the pedagogical and theoretical discussions concerning the education of improvising musicians.

Theoretical Framework

We are neither alone nor the first to defend aural learning and open-ended musical education. For instance, one practical initiative is the nonprofit US music program called Music Will, which "strive[s] to make music education available to all students regardless of their socioeconomic background" (Music Will 2025, para. 2). The program engages students who might not have otherwise had access to music education, teaching them popular musical genres such as rock, pop, R&B, Latin, rap, and country, as well as classical and jazz. Another example, in the scholarly field, Lucy Green (2001, 2008, 2013) recognizes and incorporates informal practices into formal music education (see also Wright et al. 2012; Wright 2016). As a key proponent of aural learning, Green

demonstrates how improvising musicians have always learned through free will, curiosity, and inner drive (2001, 2013). She also highlights the potential of imitative and open-ended listening in classrooms (2008).

We will investigate pedagogical practices from our own perspective and develop a different theoretical framework from Green's. In contrast to hers, our framework explores the philosophical implications of aural learning via a route informed by the enactivist view that is popular in contemporary studies on musical learning and interaction (Finke, Netland, and Solli 2023; Finke and Solli 2024; Høffding 2018; Høffding and Schiavio 2019; Krueger 2009, 2014; Schiavio and Høffding 2015; Solli 2022; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022; Solli and Netland 2023). While enactivism is not a homogenous theoretical position, it entails a broad agreement that music is not something that just happens to musicians or listeners; it is acted out—by real, phenomenal bodies. In line with the suggestions of Ståle Finke, Thomas Netland, and Mattias Solli (2023), we will combine the enactivist perspective with insights suggested by philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer 2004), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2012), and developmental psychology (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009).

Regarding the building block approach, our framework reverses the perspective. Instead of saying that improvisational powers relate to the capacity to combine parts into wholes of more or less novel combinations, as advanced by the building block approach proponents, we say contrariwise that it relates to discriminating within musical-communicative wholes. More precisely, as pointed out by Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg (2021), improvisational powers involve the capacity to engage in the exploration, creation, and co-creation of complex part-whole relationships that emerge spontaneously in the spur of the moment. Parts and wholes emerge simultaneously, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

The diverse world of resounding music that surrounds the students as they grow up forms the background of their learning processes. So do the students' ontogenetic formations—which is to say, their development history from pre-birth to current dates. Their experiences with parents, siblings, and friends are integral to their body schemas (Gallagher 2005; Merleau-Ponty 2012). And so is the power that Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (2009) call *communicative musicality*: the "innate human abilities

that make music production and appreciation possible" (4). Communicative musicality is a human power that goes beyond learning music in a narrow sense. It pertains to the fundamental capacities for pre-verbal imitation and rhythmic synchronization of behavior, all of which are keys to language acquisition (Trevarthen 1999; Trevarthen and Malloch 2018).

While some theorists believe it is a good idea to approach music in terms of well-formedness, preference rules, and the like (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1990), these descriptions are too formal and intellectual from the enactivist perspective and our present concern. Instead, music is an audible intersubjective means of real-time, aural communication, unfolding through rhythmic and tonal modes of organizations (Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021). Think of music's role in oral-musical cultures, such as the African American culture, wherein jazz first emerged (Jones 2002; Sidran 1981). In oral communities, music is typically not handled as an abstract formula but as a living medium of expression and communication. People use music to express joy, sadness, or nothing in particular. They might take it deeply seriously or play with it for fun, show off, or have no specific ambition. However, in any case, music is an integral part of everyday life, extraordinary events, education, and leisure time; in short, it is a fundamental aspect of all kinds of human relationships. Without equating music with verbal language, music can, quite literally, be said to be a resounding, symbolic form for live human communication.

By approaching this symbolic form as something enacted in real-time communication, we appreciate the relational aspect of both the music and the action in question. Not only are the musicians active, but the music can also be considered active in an extended yet non-metaphorical sense (Solli and Netland 2021). Finally, by understanding the musical learning process as a process of *Bildung*, we acknowledge that these enactive processes are transformative and holistic. They develop the whole person, both personally and professionally.

Undoubtedly, teachers and students at the NTNU Jazz Programme are fortunate, if not privileged. The institution has a small and neatly selected body of highly motivated students, and the teachers are relatively free to design the program per the oral process (Solli, Engen, and Finke 2025). This means that the learning activity we describe unfolds

under unique and specialized conditions that may not be easily transferable to more conventional school music settings. Still, we maintain that the issues discussed highlight the essential conditions needed to foster successful student improvisation.

The following sections critically discuss the building block and stepping-stone approaches, showing how the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning train students' capacity to distinguish, accomplish, and transform music in real-time communication with others. We highlight critical traits of the aural imitation method, arguing that it facilitates the acquisition of fundamental musical language and enhances expressive and discriminative powers. Next, we show how the aural-communicative ensemble learning develops the musical language capacity further. Finally, we reflect on the two practices and their relationship by proposing a Kant-inspired—or, to be precise, a Gadamer-Kant-inspired[1]—conception of *reflective judgment*, which will be key in our conception of the musical *Bildung* process. We also discuss what our findings reveal about general ideas related to higher education and *Bildung*.

Aural Imitation Method

The NTNU Jazz Programme practices the aural imitation method similar to that described by Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg (2021, 2022) and Wilf (2014), with the exception of the building block and stepping-stone approach reflected in Wilf's work. The learning process starts with the students picking out a piece of music they *like*, personally and individually, and thus from which they would like to learn. This is crucial: instead of "forcing" a musical syllabus on the students, it is vital that they are allowed to follow their drive, curiosity, and love for music. Whether the music can be called "jazz" or not, or if the piece could be rendered "simple" or "complex," "new-beginner" or "advanced," is as irrelevant as the teacher's aesthetic preferences. In line with the non-teleological learning process described by Green (2001, 2008), what matters is *just*

[1] We follow Gadamer's incorporation of Kant's aesthetic into philosophical hermeneutics; see Gadamer 2004 and 1993a. More indirectly, we also endorse the idea that Kant's reflective judgment is taken up in Merleau-Ponty's analyses of perception (2012, lxxxi ff), and Finke and Solli's (2024) concept of the symbolic body and musical expertise.

that the students desire to explore the music, that they have an inner urge to explore the music that has already enveloped them. This creates authentic student-centered learning and a diversity of musical expression. The desire is also a precious resource in the challenging tasks awaiting the aural-imitative learning process. The method is rewarding but also challenging and time-consuming.

With the music example at hand, the imitation process itself can be divided into three phases, *none* of which encourages the student to analyze the music cognitively, as in noting the name of the rhythmic measures (say, 3/4 or 4/4), the name of the tone relations ("there's a third down, there's a sixth up"), or the like. In line with aural musicians' strong and trans-idiomatic focus on *rhythm first* (Galper 2010a; Gillespie and Longo 1972; Green 2001; Roholt 2014) and the *embodying of music* (Berliner 1994; Galper 2001, 2010b), the first phase focuses on imitating and embodying music's rhythmic aspects without the use of musical instruments. In other words, whereas much music pedagogy takes for granted that learning to play equals learning to handle the musical instrument, the aural imitation method conceives the musical instrument as secondary to the body. As Galper (2010b) emphasizes, in his YouTube video *The illusion of an instrument*: "You are the instrument…your mind, your emotions are the instrument." And whereas much music pedagogy focuses on the intellectual understanding of *what* is being played, the current method (in line with Green 2013) approaches the music through *how* it unfolds: through rhythmic logic.

The student replicates the music as precisely as possible by singing, clapping, and stamping along, discriminating and imitating the music's primary rhythmic organization. Then the student moves closer and closer to the length of the notes and the length between the notes before gradually imitating several rhythmic aspects of music at once. At some point, the student can, for instance, sing the bass rhythm and stamp along with the high-hat while clapping the rhythm of the solo instrument. When the student begins to grasp how the music, as a complex whole, unfolds through the rhythmic organization, they can gradually start filling in *what* is being played, that is, the specific tones that make up the melodic and harmonic sequences.

The focus on the rhythm is not over after the first phase but remains important throughout the whole process. But when the student has embodied the music enough to

hear the music "in the mind" or with the "inner ear," without relying solely on the recording, they expand the scope of exploration beyond the rhythmic organization. In the second phase, the student is encouraged to direct attention more specifically toward tonal and harmonic aspects of the music while gradually using the musical instrument for imitation. If they imitate music in the Western tonal system, they can, for instance, stamp the rhythmic figures, *think* the root (hear the bass in mind), and play other chord tones on the instrument. An essential part of this phase is recognizing what Gadamer (2004) would call tonal and harmonic *directional sense* [*Rictungsinn*]. In other words, the student is encouraged to discriminate how the musical processes function or (alluding to Gadamer's phrasing) lead within the musical system. The directions can be explicit, as in a ii–V–I cadence, but they can also move subtly, as when a rhythmic figure is only hinted at before it is continued in another musician's melodic or harmonic initiative.

The third phase brings in spontaneous variation. While still listening very closely to the recording and absorbing what is going on in the music, where it leads, etc., the student now spontaneously plays with the recording, varying the musical expression vis-à-vis what they hear. They try smaller or more comprehensive rhythmic shifts or (if relevant) how the same ii–V–I can be altered in multiple ways while still fulfilling the same function in the music. In other words, they improvise by using and exploring the musical language they have acquired through aural and embodied imitation. This is not a building-block exercise of assembling musical parts into a larger whole, but rather an exploratory approach to navigating new pathways within music as an integrated whole. The aural imitation method unfolds as a complex, enacted exploration of part-whole relationships that emerge spontaneously for the musically attuned ear.

Musical Language Acquisition

We return to the third phase in the musical learning process below, in the context of the Kant-inspired theoretical perspective. For now, we note that the aural imitation method does not, at any point, encourage the piecemeal stringing together of building blocks. The method is not about learning rhythmic patterns and then adding harmonic features, gradually building complex wholes. Instead, by approaching the music from the holistic and qualitative perspective of rhythm, the student delves into the qualitative nuances of

the music as a whole before exploring more and more rhythmic and tonal pathways within the musical language. The music unfolds as a thick perceptual sense, whose system of equivalences the student leans into, trying to catch-and-enact as precisely as possible. The aural attention glues itself to the musical unfoldment, and the body lets itself *into* the music as a holistic resounding phenomenon, discriminating and acting out what it hears.

We also note the four communicative dimensions at work. First, the student is about to imitate, incorporate, and enact a communicative medium once resounding in a recording studio, that is, *a musical language*. The music that streams out of the student's speaker was heard and played by one or several musicians in a recording studio somewhere in the world at some point in history.

Second, the student not only imitates, incorporates, and enacts the music in a replicative parrot-like manner but starts (especially in the third phase) to *use* the same language vis-à-vis what they hear. They explore the communicative potential in the music, learning how to generate musical sense in the same musical language once used by the musicians heard on the recording. In other words, the aural imitation method initiates musical and embodied understanding of a musical language used for real-time communication by encouraging the real-time use of the language. They use the language with precision, enacting articulate discriminations vis-à-vis the music they hear on the recording.

Third, structural similarities exist between this aural-communicative learning process and fundamental language acquisition (Berliner 1994; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022). Just as small children (usually) do not analyze the language spoken by the people around them, the aural imitation method develops the ability to perceive subtle nuances in musical wholes and to express the latent meaning of musical language without the detours of analytical thought. If patient and motivated enough to do the work (which small children certainly are when they learn their primary language(s)), the student can gradually experience the marvel facilitated by the aural imitation method. Just as language eventually "comes" to a competent language user, the musical language can gradually begin to "come" to the student, filling itself in, as it were, freely, spontaneously, in ways that are adequate relative to the communicative situation.

Fourth, the structural similarity between the aural imitation method and fundamental language acquisition rests on the process of fundamental language acquisition. The seemingly trivial fact that *all* students have once been an infant growing into the linguistic community of their lifeworld gives the association with linguistic learning a profound double sense. By learning music by aural imitation, the student *challenges*, *draws upon*, and *develops further* the fundamental communicative musicality (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009) and embodied learning (Gallagher 2017; Merleau-Ponty 2012) already at work. The *way* that the student hears musical sense, by parsing, grouping, and varying the flow of resounding music, takes place within the horizon of the fundamental grammar of everyday life and its sensorimotor, affective, and symbolic modes of communication. As pointed out by Finke and Solli (2024), the aural imitation method unfolds as an original communication situation, actualizing and transforming human capacities for language.

Against this background, we can see why we refer to the aural imitation method as a practice for fundamental language acquisition in a literal, non-metaphorical sense. While learning music by aural imitation as an adolescent (obviously) is not *the same* as learning a mother tongue as a child, at stake is a further non-theoretical development of communicative abilities that goes to the core of the student's identity as a linguistic human being. The aural imitation method facilitates the formation of a mediated, expressive, non-intellectual relational-communicative competence. It is *mediated* because it occurs in a collective medium, which is to say, music. It is *expressive* because the student can discover deeply personal ways of self-expression in this collective medium (just as verbal language enables us to express ourselves in the collective language of our surroundings). It is *non-theoretical* because it encourages not cognitive meta-understanding but spontaneous enaction. And everything is relational-communicative and enacted: the student plays against and in accordance with the music once produced by the musicians they hear on the recording. As we will now see, this is how the aural imitation method prepares for aural-communicative ensemble learning. While potentially carried out alone in the practice room, the student is engaged in real-time communication, acted out in the spur of the moment.

Finally, in this framework, the reflective judgment we discuss below is not placed on top of expressive capacities, otherwise unfolding themselves independently of the judgmental powers, but integrated. Developing musical evaluations and expressive abilities are aspects of the same acquisitional process (Finke, Netland, and Solli 2023; Finke and Solli 2024; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022). The musical-reflective judgment is coextensive with communicative musicality and general embodied learning. The musical sense emerges *in* and *from* the general expressive capacities of the student. This is why the development of aural powers simultaneously taps into the whole being of the person.

Aural-Communicative Ensemble Learning

Above, we outlined the basic principles of the aural imitation method and explained how it develops fundamental musical-expressive powers that are already in place. We will now illuminate how communicative powers are extended further in ensemble teaching, what we call "aural-communicative ensemble learning."

If you have tried to learn a language, you know that recorded samples can only take you so far. To really know the language, you need to use it in actual and live conversations. Other people's wits, ideas, and openness or closedness co-determine how we express ourselves. As Gadamer (1993c) points out, the mere presence of another person can be enough for us to reveal and dissolve our prejudices and narrow-mindedness. In other words, while we as competent language users often experience that language "comes" to us as naturally as the air we breathe, as Gadamer (1993b) puts it, this flow is enabled and restrained by the people around us.

It seems reasonable to say that young people have always explored ways of playing together without needing a teacher. However, in higher jazz education, learning to play in a band is often a classroom subject as well. This has propelled discussions about whether the inherent institutionalization of jazz and, therefore, the formal learning/teaching of jazz prevents students from "authentically" engaging with the music. Wilf (2014) has referred to this as the "paradox of institutionalized creativity," citing students who experience considerable tensions between the norms set by the

institution and their inner drive and curiosity.[2] We believe the NTNU Jazz Programme practices bypass the tension, primarily by not making the aural imitation method *mandatory* for the students. In contrast to what is the case at the American institutions visited by Wilf (2014) (where students seem to be given pre-selected musical examples and graded based on how precisely they replicate the sonorous material), the Jazz Programme students do not have to practice this method; they are only inspired to do so. They are encouraged to dig into and explore the music they *like,* by aural imitation, but also by playing with others as much as they can, finding peers that like the same or approximately the same music, and then *play, have fun, book tours, play more* (Solli and Engen 2025).

At no point are students evaluated using conventional letter grades. The NTNU Jazz Programme uses a pass/fail grading system exclusively. While informal learning practices do not necessarily imply the absence of letter grading in an institutional context, the current approach helps preserve informal learning as much as possible within the educational setting. Formally, failure is linked to exceeding 20% absence in any given course and/or not achieving the stated learning outcomes—outcomes which are, by design, deliberately kept open and non-specific (Solli, Engen, and Finke 2025). In practice, both criteria are applied with discretion by the individual educator. In addition, an external examiner holds the formal authority to fail a candidate at the final recital, which is presented as a public concert.

Against this background, the classroom-based aural-communicative ensemble teaching that we will now examine comes only as an enhancement of specific and global processes that are already occurring. The fact that the students we will meet in this study have practiced the aural imitation method means that they all have acquired a musical language in which they like to express themselves. Even though they have not necessarily explored the same types of music, they all have a fundamental and embodied sense of rhythm, tonality, and of playing with others. With the aural-communicative ensemble learning described below, the students meet to explore subtle yet crucial nuances in how they communicate with each other in music.

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[2] See other discussions of the topic in Zavitz (2022).

The 9Rs and Their Application in an Ensemble

The project that generated the data underpinning the reflections on aural ensemble teaching in this article was a postdoctoral research project in the field of artistic and practice-based research, with the ensemble serving as both the primary context and object of inquiry. Over two semesters, Njål observed and taught 12 second-year students. Njål is a graduate of the same program and, having taught ensemble and principal instrument there for 12 years, was thoroughly familiar with its structure and culture. He had not provided individual instruction to these students prior to or during the project.

As a practical application of the "aural sonology" proposed by Lasse Thoresen (2015; see also Ølnes 2017), Njål taught and researched ways to develop students' modes of playing together. He aimed not to tell the students to play this or that way. Instead, the goal was to make each student more aware of how they use their listening intention in real-time communication while gaining an increased awareness of how others use their modes of aural-communicative intentionality. He attempted to exercise and challenge the students' ways of organizing musical sense and their sensitivity toward the other students' listening styles by means of nine roles, described below in Table 1.

During the data collection period, Njål had five weeks of ensemble teaching available for the project, totaling 40 teaching hours, plus five hours dedicated to students playing mini-concerts for one another. In relation to research ethics, Njål held a meeting with the students to explain the project's scope and their rights in relation to it, before the actual ensemble work. Here, he also introduced the idea behind the roles (9Rs), suggesting that roles reflect positions and relationships within ensemble interaction. However, he did not elaborate much, as theoretical understanding of the roles is not central to the method. All students consented to the video recording and its subsequent use for research purposes.

The five weeks were thematically structured as follows:

WEEK 1: Getting to know each other and creating music together, fostering trust and security. Initial experimentation with the 9Rs.

WEEK 2: Challenge each other by playing together, hearing each individual's voice within the collective. Becoming aware of habitual roles in ensemble communication.

WEEK 3: Solo concerts and introduction to aural sonology (sound analyses).

WEEK 4: More specific experimentation with the roles and positions in the interaction (9Rs).

WEEK 5: Embodying rhythmic structures, further experimentation with the 9Rs. Rhythmic "challenges" provided by Njål gave another dimension to the practice of roles (9R); something extra to be aware of while trying out different roles.

In Weeks 1 and 2, Njål participated as a musician, while in Weeks 3, 4, and 5, he observed, assigned tasks, and provided comments. Njål also established a reference group that followed along via recordings posted on a login page after each session. The reference group consisted of Associate Professor and saxophonist Eirik Hegdal; Professor and vocalist Sidsel Endresen, and pianist and composer Jon Balke. Additionally, Njål created an internal website, where the films were posted for both students and the reference group, and where he could communicate with each individual about the project in closed threads. These were internal and not intended for later use.

The five weeks of ensemble teaching were filmed in their entirety, resulting in 45 hours of footage. The examples discussed below are from the fourth week. The nine roles (9Rs) are as follows:

Function	**Description**
Switcher	Can quickly change direction in music.
Leader	Takes the lead and articulates a direction.
Idea Picker	Picks up ideas from others and follows up on proposals.
Weaver	Weaves different ideas, ties them together, and stretches them.
Orchestrator	Creates opposites, counterpoints, and textures.

Rival	Challenges the leadership role in the battle for the foreground.
Frame Maker	Frames musical forms, with clear beginnings and endings.
Strategy Maker	Has the will and ability to create a long-term form and continuity. Independent in alliances.
The Multiheaded Troll	Approaches the band as a collective; fulfills a complementary function; lets many voices merge into a larger whole.

Table 1: The 9Rs

From a pedagogical viewpoint, the 9Rs have the advantage of focusing not on the student as a person or the student's skill level or aesthetic preferences but rather on something tried out and researched in the collective. The roles are person-neutral discriminative descriptions of the music's functions, preventing the students from becoming passive or entering a defensive position. From the theoretical perspective, the 9Rs denote the correlation between *how* the student listens and the music's qualitative self-organization. Crucially, the musical roles are not only happening in the students' heads but accomplished in the shared music. Per enactivism, the roles are acted out by and between the students who contribute to realizing their musical implications.

We also see how the 9Rs prolong and enhance the learning processes initiated with the aural imitation method. By approaching the music as a whole, rather than in a piecemeal manner, the students are already engaged in exploring different roles in the music through the aural imitation method, even if this is not explicitly highlighted. By focusing on, say, rhythmic organization or bass lines, the students learn to listen from different aural perspectives than those to which they might be accustomed. These processes are further enhanced through aural-communicative ensemble learning. Instead of listening "just" within the organizational forces of beat and tonality, the students will now train in hearing and discriminating aural forces in music. They will attend to how music dynamically pushes and can be pushed in various directions, creating background/foreground, continuation, contrast, and breaks. They will learn

how everything they hear and do is always relative to how the other musicians listen and enact within the musical material they co-create in the moment. With students already sensitive to catch-and-enact minute details in the music through aural imitation work, the ensemble can quickly grow into a complex body of mutually oriented hearing where the music and the musical exploration can live.

Let us now turn to the empirical data. In this particular ensemble lesson, from week four, Njål takes on the listener and analyst positions and assigns new tasks to this quartet during the session. At the beginning of the session, he lets the four students (playing saxophone, piano, drums, and bass; see links to videos below) improvise freely and without pre-planned structures. They play solos in turn, allowing the music to develop into single-mode harmonics that unfold in a changing and relatively quick tempo. In this way, the students co-create an intermediary musical piece, acting out (or not) the potentials that emerge in the spur of the moment.

The videos below show the students playing and Njål engaged in teaching. Apart from the video that shows the start of the first improvisation and provides context for Njål's initial reflections, all the videos display the complete improvisations without any editing. This is because they demonstrate how students work with multiple roles simultaneously, how they transition from one role to the next, and how they develop a role and try it out. This dynamic would be lost if we included shortened versions that showed smaller excerpts.

Video Link 1: Njål instructs the roles in dialogue with the four students

Video Link 2: Beginning of the first improvisation

From Njål's perspective, it seems natural for students to play this music. The music sounds joyful and appears to unfold an understanding of the current musical language. But he also observes the following within the band:

- The saxophonist is a virtuoso player but plays in a somewhat unarticulated way. There are rarely highlights and contrasts in his playing. Additionally, the other players tend to slip into a somewhat static mode of interaction after a while. It seems they do not quite know where he wants to go musically. The lack of contours in his playing thus prevents progress in the band as a whole.
- The bass player sometimes plucks the strings forcefully when he gets eager. There is a lot of movement and energy, but at the same time, the sound of the band becomes relatively messy.
- The band generally tends to "get in the way" of each other. If someone takes the musical initiative, the others respond immediately. In other words, the interaction is characterized by being a kind of auditory game of tennis.

Using the 9Rs, we can rephrase the observations more analytically:

- The saxophonist takes the *leader* role but goes in and out of the foreground. Due to the lack of contour and goal points in his playing, the leader role somehow shifts to a more weaver role, and he exists more in the middle ground of the interplay, even if he plays the same number of notes. Thoresen (2015) would describe this as paradoxical complexity: musical forms with myriad details but with a perceptually simple overall character.
- The bass player takes a more supporting function but gets so eager that he is challenging the foreground and thus takes a kind of *rival* role. Maybe not intended, because he backs off immediately when the other musicians stop taking the lead function.

- The band sometimes wants this energy outburst in more freely improvised music, a feedback loop (Ølnes 2017) that characterizes the *multiheaded troll* role. But in this particular example, the band didn't reach this threshold and is playing more back and forth.

The way Njål gives these instructions is crucial. He makes his points in a neutral yet caring tone and with respect for the students' expressions. The students are not playing "wrong" or "poorly" but are not fulfilling their assigned roles. This makes the corrections feel less personal, something that impacts not only the individual but also the group as a whole. The group becomes a space where trying out new positions in musical co-creation is found to be a safe environment. Moreover, the students might also explore more familiar roles in-depth by experiencing qualitative nuances and differences in the body, the instrument, and the reactions of others to their initiatives or lack thereof. They can discover and challenge the habits they have established in their playing, not necessarily to get rid of them but to be more aware of them and then be able to expand them in the communicative situation.

Equally important, however, is that Njål gives the instructions *in music*. He demonstrates the tasks by singing examples of phrasing, often based on the students' own rhythm and tonal language, thus leading the students' attention toward other possibilities in music. There were discussions about the roles during exploration, including clarification and discussion about what the roles would mean, both musically and instrumentally.[3]

During the session, these instructions have an immediate effect. Not that they represent the *correct* way to play music, but they challenge the students to listen differently and thereby experience a different way to play:

- The saxophonist is encouraged to listen according to the *leader* role. It means being clear, taking the initiative, and creating highlights by the way he breathes air into the saxophone: with tension, sharp onsets, crescendo/decrescendo, and so on.

[3] Sometimes, as a natural response to the context-specific relevance, Njål used alternative expressions to clarify the roles, or he omitted the name. For instance, at one point, immersed in the dialogue with the students, he left out the name "Strategy Maker" when discussing how the bass player and the drummer could become more independent of the interaction.

- The bassist is encouraged to listen according to the *strategy maker*'s role. He is asked to concentrate on playing "technically perfect" hits on the instrument and being a bit cut off from the other players' direct interaction.
- The drummer is also encouraged to listen according to the *strategy maker*'s role. He is asked not to get too involved in the direct here-and-now communication but to develop a longer horizon for unfolding of the music, for instance by sticking to a basic musical idea or motif that is formed over time.
- The pianist is encouraged to be a *weaver* who lies in the music background, creating texture more than gestures. Eventually, he should shift to being a *rival*, fighting to the musical foreground with the saxophonist.

Video Link 3: Video of this particular session

The saxophonist enters the leadership role with zeal and commitment. He takes chances and makes the leader function more articulated while simultaneously trying out how far he could go to create contrasts, perseverance, and intensity. During the hour-long ensemble session, the tasks are further developed. In dialogue with the students, Njål encourages the bass player to explore the independent role and the drummer to think in motifs.

Another example shows how Njål works with a duo consisting of vocals and drums, exploring how the unusual combination of instruments can complement each other. Like in the previous example, this session also starts with the duo playing freely and without pre-established musical structures.

Video Link 4: Video of part of the session (Duo Version 1)

Njål observed the following:

- The drummer starts the improvisation, but soon follows the vocalist closely and has a few initiatives stemming from the vantage point of the drums. In other words, the drums fulfill a *weaver* role, which in practice means that the drummer prefers to pick up ideas from the vocalist and keep the playing/sound weave going while simultaneously making a few movements that change the form elements in the music. He takes almost no pauses in the music, which leads to a continuous stream of sound from the drums.
- The singer immediately takes on the *leader* role. She initiates small phrases with pauses, shaped like melodic lines, in linear, diatonic melodic guidance. The vocals first build up to an expressive vocal expression and then calm down at the end.

Njål first gives the students the following tasks:

- The drummer is encouraged to explore the *leader* role. He is encouraged to develop ideas and precise phrases and experience what it is like to initiate musical movements that the vocalist can follow. Drummers are not usually associated with this role.
- The vocalist is encouraged to explore the functions of *idea picker* and *weaver*. In effect, she is encouraged to let her voice become almost a part of the drum kit, thus supporting and ending the drummer's musical initiatives. This, in turn, is a role with which vocalists are not usually associated.

Video Link 5: Video of part of the session (Duo Version 2)

Throughout the class, Njål provides new tasks that continue testing functions while other features of the embodied way of listening and playing are challenged:

- The drummer is encouraged to sing while playing. He will try to let the musical ideas come from his hearing, more than from the rehearsed movements in his hands, arms, and legs. He is asked by Njål to be a kind of duo with himself, to imagine that he plays out the ideas that come from the singing. He is also encouraged to incorporate more movement and drama in the temporal narratives of the music.
- The vocalist is encouraged to imagine that she has several instruments at her disposal, that she "consists" of many sounds and can play them all—to think of orchestration and contrasts.
- The vocalist is also told to start the improvisation as a part of the drums, and then after a while become more independent and melodic.

Video Link 6: Video of part of the session (Duo Version 3)

The drummer emerges as more independent and creative, and eventually, he becomes so submerged in the music that he forgets to sing. But the bodily anchoring remains; he has become an independent source of the music. The vocalist has found a balance between listening/commenting and taking responsibility for keeping the energy up. She uses larger parts of her expression register. By exploring different roles than what they usually choose, are expected to take, or fall into, both parties have gained an expanded understanding of the other's (maybe usual) roles. But they have also expanded their own ways of listening within the communicative situation. They have gained more and larger aural perspectives. The musicians have become more aware of nuances in the music and the possibilities it provides by exploring and experiencing the music through bodily participation and communication.

Determining and Reflecting Judgment

The previous sections have described two practices apt to develop musicians' powers for aural-musical improvisation and indicated some theoretical implications of the practices. In this section, we wish to reflect on practices like these in light of Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment (2000). Although this philosophical approach may appear somewhat abstract from a practical-pedagogical perspective, it reflects a dialectical relationship between musical practice and reflection on communicative action—one that can illuminate subtle nuances embedded in practical pedagogy, which might otherwise be overlooked or lost within administrative systems structured around linear, step-by-step models. In a sense, this dialectic renders what is "simple" (practice) complex (theory); yet we argue that the process of illumination holds intrinsic value and may help legitimize practices that are often underappreciated precisely because of their apparent simplicity. In Norway, the aural imitation method is seldom recognized or valued at many universities, despite its historical role as the primary mode of learning for aural musicians.

Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment will help us substantially bridge the relationship between the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning, demonstrating how the latter is not an add-on placed on top of another skill set

but a further development of foundational musical language acquisition initiated by the former. Moreover, Kant's conception will help us understand how the musical development process initiated by the practice is not about training mere technical or mechanical skills, but rather about the growth of genuine human judgment in music and musical communication. Also, Kant's distinction between determining and reflective judgment (which will be explained shortly) is sensitizing. Instead of discussing powers of judgment as a single entity, Kant allows us to identify a structural difference between two modes of judgment, which may be closely intertwined yet not entirely the same. Finally, Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment has played a pivotal role in the humanistic tradition and its discussions of *Bildung.* While it falls outside the scope of this article to engage in this literature, the following perspectives from Kant will facilitate a nuanced conception of the holistic, non-instrumental, and open-ended educational processes that we believe are set in motion with the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning.

We need a brief exposition of Kant's ideas before returning to the explicit discussion topics. In his seminal work, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000), Kant famously argues that to understand *anything at all*, we must be capable of forming orders in the perceptual manifold that we encounter through sensory-aesthetic experience and understanding the structure of a possible concept in what we perceive. Successful art products initiate free play in both domains. As Kant (2000) offers, "The powers of cognition […] are hereby in free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition" (102).[4] The artworks cannot be subsumed under a concept (Kant 2000, 114–116). No rule or defined purpose can capture their characteristics, as the artworks prevent us from putting the sensory-aesthetic experience on hold, not least because the artwork is *particular*. Faced with a work of art—like (in our context) a tune or part of a tune we pick out for aural learning—we cannot rely on comparisons with other pieces of music or phenomena, just as we cannot judge it according to pre-given intellectual standards. Instead, we must deal with the piece of music we perceive here and now. By so doing, we sense the contour of a possible concept

[4] As Gadamer (2024) points out, free beauty is a methodological abstraction, but let us not make things more complicated than they need to be in the current context.

embedded in the sensory-perceptual organization. But the sensory organization constantly bursts the concept-like order that we more or less dimly perceive.

In a moment, we will examine how the plasticity of understanding that Kant associates with the concept-like order of free play invites us to conceptualize a crucial aspect of the musical learning process through aural imitation—namely, the perception and realization of latent or previously unused musical meaning, both as part of the aural imitation process and, in the next step, as part of aural-communicative ensemble learning. But first, analyzing how we judge and create art, Kant (2000) distinguishes between two kinds of judgment: *determining judgment* [*bestimmende Urteilskraft*] and *reflective judgment* [*reflektierende Urteilskraft*]. Determining judgment designates the power to apply universal categories such as scientific concepts, principles, and objective laws to empirical particulars. That is, to the extent that a category is known *a priori*, determining judgment is the ability to discern and determine whether an object of observation fits under the umbrella of this category. The perception of music can serve as an example: A theoretical conception of ii–V–I can be applied to an audible sequence. Recognizing the cadence, we can think, "there it is, the ii–V–I." In other words, we can subsume the sensory sequence under a rule for harmonic progression. In our context, this is determining judgment in a nutshell.

By contrast, reflective judgment pertains to the power to judge *particulars without existing categories*: as Kant argues, "If […] only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflecting" (Kant 2000, 67). When faced with an uncategorized singular phenomenon, we use reflective judgment to make the particular intelligible in light of an order we do not yet know. The reflective judgment makes the non-categorized particular comprehensible because we evaluate the detail according to a category that we are on the way to making through the play of our cognitive powers. We build or form categories simultaneously as we explore the potential of the particular. In other words, while determining judgment involves a "static" subsummation, reflective judgment is processual.[5]

[5] It is no coincidence that Gadamer (2004) incorporates Kant's reflective judgment into his hermeneutical conception of art encounters as *being on the way to language*. We don't *have* the language of art; we need to *form it* in accordance with the medium-specific potential of the artwork.

Conceived as an act involving reflecting judgment, hearing a ii–V–I cadence is not about categorizing the sequence *as* ii–V–I (which would amount to determining judgment) but unfolding the multiple and open-ended variations embedded in the cadence in relevant ways. Hence, we also see how reflective judgment is discriminative. It articulates and unfolds the distinctions latent in the cadence. In the Gadamerian-Kantian perspective, this capacity does not require the "detour" through the intellect's analytic powers. Yet, it *is* a highly complex intellectual capacity. It is a form of human knowledge-based judgment anchored in our fundamental powers for making sense of the perceptual and moral world (Gadamer 1993a). While this insight may not have direct, one-to-one applicability to practical-pedagogical work, we argue that it remains important to acknowledge and defend—particularly in relation to pedagogical and administrative frameworks that may fail to recognize the holistic and transformative potential of aural learning.

The Particular and the General

We can now turn to the musical practices described in the previous sections. The fact that the aural imitation method starts with and constantly encourages curiosity and love for music, and joyous exploration of it, is in line with Kant's idea that art—*music*—initiates free play in cognitive abilities. Something in the music pulls the student into an explorative process, setting their fundamental capacities for perceptual and conceptual sense-making in motion. Something in the implicit relational competence of making sense with other human beings (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Stern 1998, 2010) is set in motion. And so is the communicative musicality, the "immediate, unrational, unverbalized, conceptless, totally atheoretical potential for rapport of the self with another's mind" (Trevarthen 1993, 121). It is evoked, challenged, and (potentially) transformed (Finke and Solli 2024; Solli, Aksdal, and Inderberg 2021, 2022). In other words, the aural imitation method initiates an original communication situation (Finke, Netland, and Solli 2023; Finke and Solli 2024)—a musical, context-specific, and deep learning process with far-reaching implications. Although the play in the cognitive powers will probably never be unrestrained in the absolute sense, it is free to the extent

that the music resonates freely in the student's mind and body. This is where the finer discriminations and the corresponding judgment formation take place.

With Kant, we can say that what the student strives to hear, replicate, incorporate, and then explore by variations are cohesive, meaningful relationships in the music that has the form of a general concept without thereby being a concept. They listen and replicate the music as a sensory-perceptual organization *and stay there* without over-intellectualizing what they hear. In other words, they do not extract, schematize, and categorize the auditory manifestation into fixed or semi-fixed meta-structures that can be conceptualized independently of the resounding music. Such cognitive meta-structures are irrelevant or at least secondary compared to the sensory-perceptual order that unfolds in music. The meaning formation unfolding in the resounding music is primary. It is *this* formation of meaning to which the student directs their aural attention, imitates, and embodies, and from which the student draws learning.

While this aligns well with what we said about the aural imitation method, it might seem to contradict what we tried to illuminate with aural-communicative ensemble teaching. It might sound as if the 9Rs do indeed require the students to extract, schematize, and categorize their playing based on semi-fixed roles. However, this would entail an over-intellectualization of the roles and the musical position-taking they offer. The point of the roles is emphatically not to extract and conceptualize the current position in the music but to *hear* the music—as a perceptual phenomenon—from specific aural "perspectives" by creating a different foreground-background organization than one might do usually or habitually. This requires and develops a discriminative sensitivity to qualitative nuances in the music and the singularities of the particular communicative situation.

Before exploring the latter point further, we need to see how the aural imitation method can be said to train a general aural-communicative and generative ability based on a *particular* musical example. Learning to catch-and-enact the rhythmic form of this particular music sample is not "just" learning to hear the rhythm of *this* music sample. Rather, and more subtly, by digging into the qualitative nuances of how the music swings or grooves, the student develops the capacity to generate open-ended rhythmic forms *in general*. Through the in-depth imitative and discriminative study of the particular, the

student can catch a general and generative potential embedded in the music and learn to unfold the rhythmic logic from their own embodied understanding. By imitating and exploring a ii–V–I cadence, the student can potentially catch the generative potential latent in this sequence. And as we now know, this is something other than categorizing music with determining judgment. To phrase the point with Kant: "no determinate concept restricts [the students] to a particular rule of cognition" (2000, 102). Instead, the students learn to unfold—with precision—the general musical sense embedded in the specific qualitative nuances emerging from moment to moment. Hence, as Kant would say, the music does not make the students "into mere imitators, but rather [… puts] others on the right path for seeking out the principles in themselves and thus for following their own, often better, course" (2000, 164).

Kant (2000) would relate this generative capacity to his conception of the genius, a word that today is unfortunate since it taps into the romantic notion of the genius as an extraordinary talent, perhaps even creating without having any conscious knowledge about what they are doing. However, as a structural element (which is how Gadamer (2004) interprets Kant's conception), we can say that what Kant calls genius pertains to an inborn communicative and creative potential latent in all human beings—now potentially released by the aural imitation method. Each student is unique and lives a life distinguished by their experiences, values, losses, and accomplishments. Consequently, each student has a distinct way of exploring and carrying out the musical relationships suggested by the dialogical encounter between the music and the individual's reflective judgment. Their unique ways of sketching out the musical sense in spontaneous yet organized ways are discovered and developed in and through the imitative processes.

Hearing Differently

While the Kant-inspired philosophical perspective focuses on the development of the individual student's reflective judgment, it simultaneously situates this power within a musical language formed by and with the judgments of other humans.[6] The fact that the music streaming out of the student's phone or other kind of speaker was once heard and

[6] Gadamer (2004) revises Kant's subject-oriented view on the free play associated with aesthetics into a mediated capacity, that is, a power embedded in the languages shared with other people, socially and historically.

played by other musicians implies that it embeds or expresses *their* unfolding reflective judgments. Music is no neutral aural stream of sound, but a product *of* human cognitive powers *for* the human ear, if only for one's own inner ear (Solli, 2022). The individual student's reflective abilities emerge from a comprehensive field of human evaluations conducted beforehand. Music is a resounding dialectical field, embedding the human experience, suffering, joy, creativity, and assessments that were once part of the music's communicative situation.

Consequently, so construed, the student's capacity to make musical evaluations relates *intrinsically* to other human beings' judgments within the same material. The music "ties" together the student's reflective judgment and the judgments of the musicians they listen to on the recording. The parties explore the musical material together without being physically present at the same time and space and thus without the possibility of the musicians reacting to the student's initiatives in the music. The musical sample used as a learning vehicle is *an example*. It exemplifies human judgment carried out in a medium that transcends itself as a concrete phenomenon, and that transcends the musician who generated the music heard on the recording. All the student has to do is cultivate the ability to release the potential of the music shared with others.

In effect, the Kant-inspired perspective suggests a perplexing picture of musical autonomy. Instead of being something that emerges as a result of, as Wilf (2017) puts it, "embodied incorporation of conventional building blocks of jazz improvisation" (241) and "flawless generation of conventional musical ideas" forcing "students to cultivate new musical ideas as to resist the standardization processes that have resulted from academization of jazz training" (ibid.), we might say that autonomous expression emerges with the capacity to differentiate within the music shared with others. Musical freedom is coextensive with the capacity to listen in accordance with other people's reflective judgments within the same music. Gadamer (2004) captures the transformation potentially at stake: "It's enough to say that we understand in a *different way if we understand at all*" (296, italics original). Understanding differently means a genuine non-directed openness for how other humans understand the same thing—or understand the same music: it "involves recognizing that I myself must accept some

things that are against me, even though no one forces me to do so" (ibid., 355). And he adds (elsewhere): "Herein lies the true freedom of human beings…to listen to this or that, or even to turn away from listening [gerade wegzuhören]" (Gadamer 2000, 49).

While human freedom, as such, is a topic that surpasses the scope of this article, we can relate what we say here to the aural imitation method (and the aural-communicative ensemble learning, shortly). The process of understanding differently along with others and *their* reflective judgments is present in all phases. But it comes especially to the fore in the third phase, wherein the student plays with the music, trying out and exploring the musical language. What they play out and explore are other people's ways of hearing within the same music, not necessarily in a direct sense, as if imagining another person playing, but in a musical sense. They experiment with a kind of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic position-taking in the music, which is intrinsically tied to how other people would perceive the same music. This is how the reflective judgment releases the generative potential of the music. Learning to swing or groove, or letting the beat "bounce off," "push," "pull," "lean forward," or become "laid-back" or "in the pocket" (neatly analyzed by Roholt 2014) is coextensive with the relational, communicative, and flexible freedom of hearing differently which simultaneously is a way to form autonomous expressive freedom. Similarly, if the student digs into major/major tonality, they can hear general organizational principles at work in the tonal language. They can hear how the tonal system makes perceptual sense as an unfolding whole that can never be used up. Other people can always hear new tonal pathways latent in the system, but the student can participate freely in exploring these pathways from within the language and their own understanding of it.

Further Enhancement

We now return to the aural-communicative ensemble learning and extensively bridge the relationship between the aural imitation method and the ensemble pedagogy. As a collaborative development of reflective judgment, aural-communicative ensemble learning allows students to reflect together in music. In a crucial sense, this reflection has already started in the activity of exploring the music through mimetic efforts and the spontaneous variation brought in by the third phase. Simultaneously, the 9Rs are aural

lenses, so to speak, that focus on new qualitative particulars in the music, whose potential can be unfolded in the reciprocal formation of the normative musical space that emerges between the students. The roles are reflective stances or position-taking in the musical whole, ways to organize and push the music ahead along various foreground/background organizations. With the 9Rs, the students reflect within the musical medium, being on the way to an ever more articulated musical participatory sense-making by hearing differently in accordance with and against each other. In this perspective, the teacher's guiding comments and tasks are also part of the reflection.

Recall how Njål gives the tasks. He does not put himself above the field of reciprocal reflective judgment but participates in musical exploration. In other words, the Kantian perspective makes sense of a teacher role that is not normative and top-down, but rather an open-ended process working bottom-up from the musical latencies. The teacher's role is not to proclaim how things are or should be but to reveal the directional meaning and unaccomplished opportunities in the music and the students.

Readers familiar with Green (2001, 2008) might recognize a connection between the points we now make in our analysis and her descriptions of the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than the holder of all knowledge or power in the classroom. In line with Green (2001, 2008), we might say that Njål and the students co-create the knowledge on equal terms, not just in music, but also in discussions—although Njål sometimes speaks more than the students, when giving instructions and the like. Moreover, against the background of the aural imitation method, we can see why this method is relevant for aural-communicative ensemble learning, far beyond training specific skills, such as playing a particular rhythmic pattern or melodic phrase. The *interhuman* capacity for reflective judgment already sharpened through the aural imitation method is further developed in real-time communication with actual peers. The reflective judgment, as a position-taking, is further explored along other axes, particularly in the third phase of the aural imitation method. The 9Rs help uncover and dissolve the individuals' expectations and habitual communication loops. Instead of being fixed in perceptual modes that subordinate what is heard under already established categories that organize the ensemble interaction (determining judgment), the students explore the

musical sense latent in other minute qualitative nuances that only emerge in live and reciprocal communication. The 9Rs focus on novel ways of hearing musical sense (with the form of a general concept without thereby being a concept, as we might say with Kant), helping the students accomplish this sense together. And by so doing, the aural-communicative ensemble learning can potentially develop the student's expressive freedom, not as a value pursued for its own sake, but organically.

Recall what we saw in the video above: When the bass player, drummer, and singer were ready for it, the general musical sense latent in them could flow into the collective and transform it from within. This transformation in musical understanding cannot be forced or ordered. In line with the underpinnings of Green (2001), it can only be facilitated.

Building a Musical Life: Concluding Remarks

The previous sections have illuminated two interrelated practices that are apt to develop young people's powers for aural-musical improvisation. Together, the aural imitation method and the aural-communicative ensemble learning comprise a holistic auditory learning program, aiming to foster greater musical freedom in learners. We have also proposed some theoretical perspectives that arguably preserve essential structures of the aural learning processes and have given criticisms of the building block and stepping-stone approaches. Let us adopt a critical perspective to conclude and round things off.

While we would wish to regard the building block approach and the stepping-stone approach as obsolete for purposes of higher music education, it is not a given that everyone will agree and follow our suggestions. What we would like to emphasize, however, is the inadequacy of trying to capture the learning processes discussed in the previous sections with the building block approach and the stepping-stone approach. To the extent that approaches find themselves within the framework of determining judgment, this implies a category mistake. As far as we can see, the building block and stepping-stone approaches are products of determining judgment: the building block approach by dividing the music into blocks, the stepping-stone approach by letting the teacher organize musical examples under

categories such as "easy," "more advanced," "good," or "bad" start. In effect, the building block and stepping-stone approaches seem to run counter to the holistic and reflective judgment-based approach we have tried to defend in this article. They seem to pre-steer and thus also limit the almost endless potential that evolves in human reflective judgment and young people's capacities to explore music along novel axes.

Along these lines, the building block approach and the stepping-stone approach seem to suit a larger idea of education as a linear and standardized process based on the standardization of curriculum and evaluation (Leddy 2022). In a similar vein, the building block approach and the stepping-stone approach seem to go hand in hand with the idea that formal curricula and assessment models need to rely on standardized learning outcomes (Nieminen, 2022) and the idea advocated by constructive alignment theorists, describing learning processes in steps outlined backward from a pre-established goal (Biggs, 1996). Thus, critically reviewed, the modeling also seems to fit with an instrumental conception of *Bildung*: the idea that human growth through education is *for something*. As summarized by Rebekka Horlacher (2015), this implies suggested reading lists (or music examples, in our case) and selection of relevant facts (or building blocks); and, most clearly, it means the general "enumeration of the requisite skills and standards of measure to be attained by one who aspires to be deemed educated, or *gebildet*" (1–2).

By contrast, the non-linear and non-normative approaches illuminated with the aural imitation method and aural-communicative ensemble learning seem to sit well with the non-instrumental conception of *Bildung* introduced above, i.e., the ongoing and non-fixable process that Gadamer (2004) describes as "keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view" (15). Gadamer writes, "The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated [*gebildet*] man [sic] keeps himself open are not a fixed applicable yardstick, but are present to him [sic] only as a viewpoint of possible others" (ibid., 15–16).

In our context, music is the ultimate yardstick of possible others. Kant, Gadamer, and the authors cited above provide a theoretical framework that takes seriously what other people have done before. But they also suggest a democratization of musical powers. Reflective judgment does not belong to any elite or group picked out to decide

which music counts as "good" building blocks for new generations. *All* human beings have this potential merely by being human beings. The critical normative factor worth listening to is the resounding music—not cultures built around the music. Music challenges the subject's cognitive abilities by concretely expressing a subject-transcending order. This normative standard is not a directive or command to do this or that, but a qualitative opening to other ways of listening and communicating with music.

In the same vein, the educational processes we have illuminated in this paper are not about rule-following or rule-breaking but are holistic and open-ended learning experiences that potentially impact students as a whole—both as musicians and as moral beings "open to what is other" (Gadamer 2004, 15). In other words, while musical skills and powers of judgment are developed through concrete and specific practices, and while these skills and abilities manifest in precise communication within the musical language, it doesn't make sense to view them as isolated from the rest of the human in question. Musical learning impacts and transforms the whole embodied and enacting consciousness, not just a part.

That said, it would be wrong to uphold the formation of reflective judgment as a detached or idealized process. As pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), distinctions involving aesthetic taste are *never* neutral but *always* influenced by social and political biases, preferences, and expectations. Hence, to the extent that we consider the development of reflective judgment as embedded in an *actual* learning environment, the openness of the developmental process will be a delicate matter. The mimetic synchronization that always goes on within human communities (Stern 2010) will easily manipulate the distinctions in specific directions. Spoken or unspoken norms that figure between teachers, students, or between these two groups will potentially steer the open-ended process of reflective judgment, consciously or unconsciously, defining, for instance, what's popular or outdated, or what signals correct artistic or political identity as opposed to problematic. In other words, exploring the unknown categories in music can quickly be subsumed under normative social categories. While we have not surveyed the NTNU Jazz Programme students and teachers, we expect similar norms to work in

the aural imitation method and the processes associated with the aural-communicative ensemble learning.

However, Kant (and Gadamer; see his analysis of *transformation into structure*; 2004) encourages us to turn the perspective around. The freedom associated with reflective judgment is a *regulative ideal* (Kant 2000), which is to say, a standard that can never be fully reached but can still guide us in the right direction. While acknowledging that the process will always be more or less influenced by some social norms and expectations, the reflective judgmental power can still help students and educators steer the process toward an open-ended yet fruitful path of musical learning. In this approach, the human mimetic power is also the power to catch, enact, and accomplish unattained possibilities latent in the situation. The Kantian reflective judgment works toward an ideal, inclusive, and democratic musical community that may be unattained empirically but *can* and *should* exist.

Still, it is one thing to advocate the open processes described in this article as a regulative idea and another to operationalize and implement them more broadly. How to work with the aural imitation method in a classroom with 20 or 30 twelve-year-old children? One possible approach would be to divide the class into groups of, for instance, four students and allow them to explore a self-selected piece of music by ear, without reference to any theoretical framework. This would, however, require a significant investment of time, as well as a suspension of any potential standard assessment regimes, enabling students to engage with the music fully for its own sake rather than for the purpose of achieving grades. Or, how to facilitate a proper auditory learning process for a student or group of students within a college environment that does not appreciate or understand what is at stake? One possible approach is to facilitate informal jam sessions with experienced aural musicians who can model the ethos of aural musicianship and inspire students to engage more deeply with music they appreciate, through detailed aural imitation and by experiencing the value of thoroughly learning, for instance, a single tune by ear. Such experiential knowledge may generate significant spill-over effects into more traditional ear training practices and theoretical music understanding taught within the institutional framework.

Finally, how would the aural-communicative ensemble learning and the 9Rs sound in other contexts without an explicit foundation in the aural imitation method? Since this project took place, Njål has explored the application of the 9Rs in ensemble teaching for folk musicians (Ølnes 2025). Although these students did not share the same background of learning from recordings as those previously discussed, they had primarily learned by ear throughout their lives. However, they had limited experience with improvisation, as well as with listening into the different layers of a tune and exploring multiple ways of playing the same tune. The 9Rs offered them tools for engaging in this kind of musical excavation. The idea of focusing on specific roles—such as leading, supporting, and acting independently—allowed the folk music students to connect with their inner musical reservoir, without ever mentioning the term "improvisation." However, when it comes to further explorations of the practical aspects of the methods and perspectives described in this article, we leave them open for future research.

Ethics Protocol

The authors declare that they received consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

Nothing to declare.

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Nothing to declare.

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