The jazz of interpreting

Interpreting is a creative act. Is improvisation part of the process?

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Music has a notable place among my memories. As the son of Italian immigrants I grew up with Catholicism, of which my strongest good memory is of high mass on Easter Sunday – incense, music, pageantry. Teachers loved my voice through 7th grade, which was about the time we stopped singing in school AND my voice changed. Later at university I was fortunate to be able to attend a workshop for non-musicians with jazz trumpeter Don Cherry, who led an orchestra of two score 20-somethings on rhythm sticks, thumb pianos and basically anything that could make noise. Within an hour we were making music.

I started listening to jazz. I also became an interpreter. I became fascinated with improvisation.

Much has been written about the cognitive processes of interpreting, but what goes on in a musician's brain when improvising? Scientists at John Hopkins have been trying to answer that question using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to shed light on the improvisation that people use in everyday life.

One conclusion: “When jazz musicians improvise, their brains turn off areas linked to self-censoring and inhibition, and turn on those that let self-expression flow.”

Chief researcher Charles J. Limb "notes that this type of brain activity may also be present during other types of improvisational behavior that are integral parts of life for artists and non-artists alike. For example, he notes, people are continually improvising words in conversations and improvising solutions to problems on the spot.”

Now this is interesting. It could indicate that when we try to memorize, we may interfere with more creative activities like improvising. This makes sense to me. Have you ever performed poorly on an exam because you were trying to bring in everything you know? And left feeling that you had been so tight that you had gotten in your own way?

Limb introduced his research at a TED event under the title Your brain on improv. With the help of a pianist and a rapper, he illustrates how he used an fMRI scan to examine “what happens in the brain during something that is memorized and over-learned and what happens in the brain during something that is spontaneously generated or improvised.” And he mentions that the area of the brain that becomes more active during improvisation is also the seat of working memory, something we interpreters use all the time.

People often talk about the soft skills an interpreter should have: empathy, intellectual curiosity, flexibility, a quick mind, etc. I’m not sure improvisation can be classified as a soft skill; perhaps it is an approach or mind-set that on the right day and in the right context brings them and all our harder
skills together, producing that state of grace known as being in the zone. At the very least I find it a useful paradigm.

When saxophonist Steve Lacy was asked to explain the difference between composition and improvisation in 15 seconds, he replied: “In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.”

Sounds familiar to me. And to you?

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