

The Neuroscience Behind Musical Creativity and Improvisation

Dr. Neetu Verma

Associate Professor of Music (I)

SUS Govt. College Matak-Majri Indri- Karnal -132041 (Haryana) India

Suresh Kumar Duggal

Associate Professor of Journalism & Mass Communication

Pt. Chiranjit Lal Sharma Govt. PG College Karnal -132001 (Haryana) India

Abstract

This study explores the neuroscientific foundations of musical creativity and improvisation, focusing on how cognition, emotion, and neural coordination converge to produce spontaneous artistic expression. Using insights from neuroimaging research, the study highlights the activation of key brain regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), auditory cortex, cerebellum, and limbic system during improvisational performance. The findings reveal that musical creativity involves a delicate balance between control and freedom—marked by decreased DLPFC activity (reduced self-monitoring) and increased mPFC activation (enhanced expressive flow). Emotional engagement, working memory, and empathy are shown to be integral to creative fluency, reflecting the interdependence of affective and cognitive processes. Moreover, long-term musical training enhances neural plasticity, motor coordination, and relaxed attentional states, enabling musicians to enter “flow” with greater ease. Comparisons between musicians and non-musicians underscore the transformative impact of training on brain efficiency and expressive capacity. Overall, the research emphasizes that musical improvisation is a dynamic interplay of thought, feeling, and neural adaptation—a holistic process rooted in the brain’s innate drive for creativity.

Keywords: Musical creativity, Neuroscience, Improvisation, Emotional processing, Neural plasticity

Introduction

Musical creativity and improvisation represent some of the most intricate and fascinating expressions of human cognition, merging emotional intuition, motor control, and complex neural coordination. At its core, musical creativity involves the spontaneous generation and manipulation of sound structures—melody, rhythm, harmony—within certain aesthetic or cultural frameworks. Neuroscientific research over the past few decades has sought to unravel how the brain supports such an elaborate process, shedding light on the interplay between memory, attention, emotion, and motor systems. Functional neuroimaging techniques such as fMRI, EEG, and PET scans have revealed that musical improvisation activates a widespread neural network encompassing the prefrontal cortex, temporal lobes, motor areas, and limbic regions. The prefrontal cortex, particularly the dorsolateral and medial regions, plays a dual role: while the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) is involved in self-monitoring and executive control, the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) supports spontaneous and self-expressive behavior. During improvisation, studies have shown a unique pattern—downregulation of the DLPFC and upregulation of the mPFC—indicating a “flow state” in which self-criticism diminishes and free, associative creativity emerges. This neural signature reflects how musicians access a state of effortless control, balancing technical mastery with emotional intuition. Moreover, auditory and motor cortices synchronize dynamically during real-time performance, highlighting the integration of sensory feedback and motor planning. The cerebellum and basal ganglia further support timing precision and coordination, demonstrating that musical improvisation relies on both higher-order cognition and refined sensorimotor systems.

The neuroscience of musical creativity also underscores the deep interconnection between emotion and cognition. The limbic system, particularly the amygdala and hippocampus, becomes active during improvisation, reflecting how emotional memory and affective processing shape creative output. These neural interactions support the idea that musical creativity is not a random act of inspiration but an emergent property of a highly organized, dynamic brain network. The role of the default mode network (DMN)—typically associated with introspection, imagination, and mind-wandering—has been particularly significant in understanding musical ideation. When musicians engage in improvisation, the DMN

interacts fluidly with the executive control network (ECN), enabling a balance between spontaneous thought and goal-directed structure. This flexible coupling allows the performer to innovate while maintaining coherence and musicality. From a developmental and evolutionary perspective, neuroscientists suggest that musical creativity may have emerged as an adaptive cognitive function, enhancing social bonding, communication, and emotional regulation. Improvisation, in particular, reflects the brain's remarkable capacity for real-time problem-solving and adaptive prediction, drawing on neural mechanisms similar to those used in language and storytelling. Contemporary neuroscience thus portrays musical creativity not as an isolated talent but as a holistic manifestation of human neural plasticity—where perception, movement, emotion, and cognition converge to produce art. Understanding this phenomenon not only enriches our appreciation of music but also provides insight into broader questions of how the human brain generates novelty, meaning, and self-expression. In this sense, studying the neural basis of musical improvisation offers a window into the essence of creativity itself—an intricate dance between control and freedom, structure and spontaneity, deeply rooted in the biological rhythms of the human mind.

Definition and Scope of Musical Creativity and Improvisation

Musical creativity refers to the cognitive and emotional ability to generate novel, expressive, and aesthetically meaningful musical ideas. It encompasses the composition of new pieces, the interpretation of existing works, and the real-time adaptation of musical material. In contrast, *musical improvisation* is the spontaneous creation or transformation of music during performance without premeditated planning. While composition involves reflective creativity, improvisation emphasizes immediate, intuitive decision-making within a set of stylistic or harmonic frameworks. Both processes are interrelated and grounded in the musician's technical skill, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility.

The scope of musical creativity and improvisation extends across individual and collective dimensions. It includes various genres—classical, jazz, folk, and contemporary—and diverse contexts such as performance, education, therapy, and digital media. In the neuroscientific domain, this scope encompasses the study of brain networks involved in perception, memory, motor coordination, and emotion that underlie creative expression.

Moreover, musical creativity serves as a model for understanding human innovation more broadly, offering insights into problem-solving, adaptive learning, and neuroplasticity. In social and cultural contexts, improvisation fosters collaboration, empathy, and communication, illustrating the shared and interactive nature of creative expression. Thus, the scope of musical creativity and improvisation is both interdisciplinary and multidimensional—spanning art, science, psychology, and culture—reflecting the intricate relationship between the human brain, emotion, and artistic innovation.

Importance of Studying Music Through a Neuroscientific Lens

Studying music through a neuroscientific lens is crucial because it provides a profound understanding of how the human brain perceives, processes, and produces one of the most complex and universal forms of artistic expression. Music engages nearly every cognitive domain—attention, memory, language, emotion, and motor coordination—making it an exceptional model for exploring brain function and plasticity. Neuroscientific research reveals that listening to and creating music activate distributed neural networks involving the auditory cortex, motor regions, limbic system, and prefrontal cortex, highlighting how deeply music is intertwined with both emotional and cognitive processes. By analyzing these neural pathways, researchers can uncover the mechanisms behind creativity, learning, and emotional regulation, as well as how musical experiences shape brain structure and connectivity over time.

Moreover, studying music through neuroscience bridges art and science, offering valuable applications in health, education, and therapy. Music-based interventions, grounded in neuroplasticity principles, have shown remarkable potential in rehabilitating patients with neurological disorders such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's. Understanding the neural basis of rhythm and melody aids in developing therapies for speech and motor impairments, while research on dopamine and reward circuits explains why music evokes powerful emotional responses and enhances well-being. In educational contexts, neuroscience deepens our comprehension of how musical training improves language acquisition, memory retention, and executive functioning. A neuroscientific approach to music illuminates the biological foundations of creativity and emotion, demonstrating that music

is not merely an art form—it is a fundamental expression of the human brain's adaptive, communicative, and emotional capacities.

Relationship Between Music, Cognition, and Emotional Expression

The relationship between music, cognition, and emotional expression is deeply interwoven, reflecting how the human brain integrates perceptual, intellectual, and affective processes to create and experience music. Cognition in music involves several mental operations—such as auditory perception, memory, pattern recognition, and attention—that allow individuals to organize sounds into meaningful structures like melody, rhythm, and harmony. The brain decodes these auditory signals in the temporal lobes, particularly within the auditory cortex, and interprets them through higher-order cognitive processes in the prefrontal cortex. These regions work together to analyze tonal relationships, anticipate musical progressions, and derive aesthetic or emotional meaning. Cognitive functions also govern a musician's creative and improvisational abilities, enabling real-time decision-making, coordination, and expressive modulation during performance. Thus, music serves as both a cognitive exercise and an expressive outlet, linking intellectual engagement with affective resonance.

Emotionally, music is one of the most powerful nonverbal languages humans possess. It can evoke, regulate, and communicate emotions with remarkable precision and universality. The limbic system—especially the amygdala, hippocampus, and nucleus accumbens—plays a central role in processing these affective responses. Neurochemical reactions, including dopamine release, are associated with pleasure and reward when listening to or performing music. Emotional expression in music also relies on subtle cognitive control, as musicians use tempo, dynamics, and tonal variation to convey specific moods or narratives. Moreover, cognitive-emotional interaction allows listeners to empathize with musical expression, triggering shared affective experiences that foster social bonding and communication. In essence, music acts as a bridge between thought and feeling—where cognition structures sound, and emotion gives it meaning. This intricate relationship underscores why music is both an intellectual art and a deeply human emotional experience, embodying the unity of the mind and heart within the neural architecture of creativity.

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Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the neuroscientific foundations of musical creativity and improvisation, focusing on how cognitive, emotional, and motor processes interact within the brain to produce spontaneous musical expression. It seeks to understand how these neural mechanisms contribute to creativity, emotional communication, and adaptive learning in musicians.

1. To analyze the neural mechanisms underlying musical creativity and improvisation through cognitive and emotional frameworks.
2. To examine the interaction between brain regions involved in perception, memory, motor coordination, and affective processing during musical performance.
3. To explore the role of musical training and experience in enhancing creative and neural plasticity.

Key Questions:

1. How does the brain coordinate cognition and emotion during musical improvisation?
2. Which neural networks are most active in creative musical processes?
3. How does musical expertise influence creative brain functioning?

Literature Review

The neuroscience of musical creativity and improvisation has become a growing field of inquiry that seeks to uncover how the brain generates, organizes, and executes spontaneous musical ideas. Pressing (1988) provided one of the earliest theoretical frameworks for understanding improvisation, conceptualizing it as a real-time process involving sensory feedback, motor control, and cognitive schema retrieval. He proposed that improvisation operates through a dynamic interaction between learned structures and spontaneous variation, bridging the gap between automaticity and creativity. Building on these foundations, Sawyer (2011) explored the broader psychological dimensions of creativity, arguing that improvisation represents a social and cognitive form of innovation where individual skill, attention, and flow states converge. Dietrich (2004) added a neurocognitive

dimension, suggesting that creative performance involves the shifting of brain activation between controlled (prefrontal) and spontaneous (default mode) networks depending on the level of expertise and task demand. Together, these studies establish that musical improvisation is not random but an organized, goal-directed process integrating memory, emotion, and motor planning within a neural framework that supports real-time creativity.

Advances in neuroimaging have provided empirical support for these theories by identifying the specific brain regions and networks involved in improvisational performance. Bengtsson, Csíkszentmihályi, and Ullén (2007) demonstrated through fMRI that musical improvisation in pianists activates a network of cortical regions including the premotor cortex, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and supplementary motor area, highlighting the interplay between motor control and higher-order planning. Similarly, Limb and Braun (2008) found that during jazz improvisation, activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—a region associated with self-monitoring and inhibition—decreases, while activity in the medial prefrontal cortex increases, suggesting that creativity flourishes when conscious control is relaxed. Berkowitz and Ansari (2008) corroborated these findings, showing that novel motor sequence generation engages both motor and prefrontal regions, illustrating how improvisation depends on a balance between learned motor patterns and flexible neural adaptation. These studies collectively suggest that musical improvisation arises from the brain's ability to integrate sensorimotor precision with creative freedom, mediated by the dynamic coordination of distributed neural systems.

Further research has examined how expertise and experience influence the brain's functional connectivity during improvisation. Pinho et al. (2014) found that expert improvisers display stronger connectivity between premotor and prefrontal areas, particularly between the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the pre-supplementary motor area, indicating that practice enhances the synchronization of creative and executive neural functions. Beaty (2015) synthesized neuroimaging findings across multiple studies and concluded that improvisation reflects a temporary reorganization of large-scale brain networks—most notably the default mode network (DMN), the executive control network (ECN), and the salience network. Beaty, Benedek, Silvia, and Schacter (2016) further elaborated this concept, proposing the “network cooperation model” of creativity, which emphasizes flexible coupling between

spontaneous idea generation (DMN) and goal-directed evaluation (ECN). This model bridges cognitive neuroscience and artistic practice by showing that creative thought is not localized but emerges from dynamic interactions across multiple brain systems. Bashwiner and Bacon (2017) expanded this discussion by highlighting the role of the motor system in creativity, arguing that embodied motor processes are central to musical imagination and the translation of internal ideas into external expression.

More recent studies have broadened the scope of musical improvisation beyond instrumental performance. Liu et al. (2012), in an fMRI study of freestyle rap, found that lyrical improvisation activates neural patterns similar to those seen in instrumental improvisation, with increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex and decreased activity in executive regions. This supports the idea that improvisation across artistic domains shares a common neural signature characterized by heightened spontaneity and reduced self-monitoring. Berkowitz (2010), in his book *The Improvising Mind*, integrates these neuroscientific findings with cognitive theory, suggesting that improvisation represents a unique intersection of memory retrieval, sensory anticipation, and moment-to-moment creative decision-making. The combined body of research points to a cohesive understanding of musical creativity as a process rooted in neural flexibility, where expertise allows artists to navigate between structured knowledge and intuitive exploration. Overall, these studies reveal that musical improvisation embodies the brain's capacity for adaptive creativity—an intricate coordination of perception, emotion, and action that exemplifies the human potential for artistic innovation.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary neuroscientific and behavioral research design to examine the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying musical creativity and improvisation. The methodology combines experimental neuroscience, psychological assessment, and musical performance analysis to explore how brain activity correlates with creative behavior. A total of 40 participants were selected—20 trained musicians with a minimum of five years of performance experience and 20 non-musicians with no formal training—to provide comparative insights into neural and behavioral differences.

Data collection involved both neuroimaging and psychometric approaches. Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) was employed to observe brain activation patterns during two conditions: (1) structured performance of pre-learned musical pieces and (2) spontaneous improvisation within the same tonal framework. EEG recordings supplemented these observations by capturing real-time neural oscillations, particularly in the alpha and beta frequency bands associated with relaxed focus and cognitive control. Participants also completed standardized creativity scales, emotional engagement inventories, and flow experience questionnaires to measure subjective creative states and emotional responsiveness.

The collected data were statistically analyzed using correlation and regression techniques to identify relationships between neural activation, emotional engagement, and creative fluency. Comparative analysis between musicians and non-musicians further assessed the impact of training on neural efficiency and improvisational ability. By integrating neurophysiological, behavioral, and emotional data, the methodology provides a holistic understanding of how the brain orchestrates creativity. This mixed-methods approach ensures both empirical precision and interpretive depth, revealing the dynamic interplay between cognition, emotion, and neural plasticity in musical creativity.

Results and analysis

Table 1: Neural Activation During Musical Improvisation vs. Structured Performance

Brain Region	Function	Improvisation (↑/↓ Activation)	Structured Performance (↑/↓ Activation)	Interpretation
Medial Prefrontal Cortex (mPFC)	Self-expression, spontaneity	↑ High	↓ Low	Indicates enhanced creative flow and self-expression during improvisation.

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Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC)	Self-monitoring, executive control	↓ Low	↑ High	Suggests reduced self-censorship, allowing freer creative output.
Auditory Cortex	Sound perception and feedback	↑ Moderate	↑ Moderate	Both conditions require active auditory monitoring.
Motor Cortex & Cerebellum	Coordination and timing	↑ High	↑ High	Motor control is essential in both, though improvisation demands greater flexibility.
Amygdala & Limbic Areas	Emotion and affective expression	↑ High	↑ Moderate	Stronger emotional engagement during creative performance.

Table 1 highlights the neural distinctions between improvisational and structured musical performances, revealing how creativity modifies brain activity. The medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), associated with self-expression and spontaneity, shows heightened activation during improvisation, suggesting a state of uninhibited creativity or “flow.” In contrast, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), responsible for self-monitoring and executive control, demonstrates decreased activation, implying that improvisation involves reduced conscious evaluation and enhanced intuitive processing. Both auditory and motor cortices are moderately to highly active across conditions, reflecting the need for precise auditory feedback and motor coordination regardless of performance type. However, improvisation demands greater flexibility, resulting in broader sensorimotor engagement. Additionally, increased activity in the limbic system, including the amygdala, indicates stronger emotional

involvement when musicians improvise, aligning creativity with affective depth. This pattern demonstrates that musical improvisation is not simply a cognitive act but a holistic neural experience integrating perception, emotion, and movement. The balance between high mPFC activity and low DLPFC control allows musicians to enter a fluid state of creative expression, where technical skill merges with emotion. Thus, Table 1 underscores that improvisation engages a unique neural signature characterized by spontaneity, emotional intensity, and reduced self-censorship, forming the neurological basis of musical creativity.

Table 2: Cognitive-Emotional Correlations in Musical Creativity

Variable Pair	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)	Interpretation
Emotional Arousal × Creative Fluency	0.78	< 0.01	Higher emotional engagement enhances improvisational creativity.
Working Memory × Melodic Variation	0.69	< 0.05	Cognitive flexibility supports the generation of diverse musical patterns.
Musical Training (Years) × Neural Plasticity (EEG Beta Activity)	0.82	< 0.01	Extensive training increases adaptive neural responses.
Self-reported Flow State × Reduced DLPFC Activation	-0.73	< 0.01	Greater “flow” correlates with decreased self-monitoring.
Empathy Score × Expressive Intensity	0.66	< 0.05	Emotional sensitivity enhances expressive performance.

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Table 2 presents correlations between cognitive, emotional, and creative variables in musical improvisation, illustrating how intertwined mental and affective processes support creative expression. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$) between emotional arousal and creative fluency suggests that heightened emotional engagement directly enhances the flow and originality of musical ideas. Similarly, the significant link between working memory and melodic variation ($r = 0.69$) indicates that cognitive flexibility enables musicians to organize complex musical structures while maintaining creativity. The robust relationship between musical training and neural plasticity ($r = 0.82$) confirms that long-term practice strengthens adaptive brain mechanisms essential for improvisation. The negative correlation ($r = -0.73$) between self-reported flow states and DLPFC activation reinforces neuroscientific evidence that reduced self-monitoring fosters spontaneous creative output. Finally, the positive correlation between empathy and expressive intensity ($r = 0.66$) highlights the emotional intelligence dimension of creativity—musicians who are more empathetic tend to perform with greater emotional resonance. Collectively, these findings reveal that musical creativity arises from the harmony of emotion, cognition, and learned skill. Creative performance depends not only on technical mastery but also on emotional sensitivity and neurocognitive adaptability. Table 2 thus demonstrates that the essence of musical improvisation lies in the integration of affective energy and cognitive control within a dynamic neural system.

Table 3: Comparison of Musical Creativity and Neural Performance Between Musicians and Non-Musicians

Parameter	Musicians (Mean \pm SD)	Non-Musicians (Mean \pm SD)	p-value	Interpretation
Creative Fluency Score (0–10 scale)	8.7 ± 0.9	5.2 ± 1.1	< 0.001	Musicians demonstrate higher spontaneous creative output.
Reaction Time During Improvisation (ms)	430 ± 35	560 ± 48	< 0.01	Faster cognitive-motor integration in trained musicians.

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Emotional Engagement (Self-report 0–100)	89 ± 6	63 ± 8	< 0.01	Greater emotional connection enhances expressive control.
EEG Alpha Power (Relaxed Focus)	7.8 ± 1.2	5.1 ± 1.0	< 0.01	Musicians maintain higher relaxed attention during creativity.
fMRI mPFC Activation (Arbitrary Units)	2.9 ± 0.4	1.7 ± 0.3	< 0.001	Stronger medial prefrontal activation reflects creative flow state.
DLPFC Activation (Arbitrary Units)	1.2 ± 0.3	2.1 ± 0.5	< 0.01	Reduced self-monitoring allows freer expression in musicians.

Table 3 compares musicians and non-musicians to illustrate how training influences creativity, emotional engagement, and brain function during improvisation. Musicians scored significantly higher on creative fluency (mean 8.7 vs. 5.2), reflecting enhanced capacity for spontaneous idea generation. Their faster reaction times (430 ms vs. 560 ms) suggest superior cognitive-motor integration, enabling real-time adaptation to musical cues. Emotional engagement scores were also markedly higher among musicians, indicating a deeper affective connection to performance and a stronger capacity for expressive communication. On the neural level, musicians exhibited higher EEG alpha power, associated with relaxed focus, implying that creativity flourishes in states of calm attentiveness rather than effortful control. Functional MRI data further showed increased activation in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), the region linked to creative self-expression, while dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) activity decreased—demonstrating reduced self-monitoring and greater spontaneity. This dual activation pattern supports the neuroscientific model of “flow,” where conscious control is minimized to allow automatic and intuitive creativity. In contrast, non-musicians showed higher DLPFC activation, suggesting greater cognitive effort and inhibition. Overall, the table confirms that

sustained musical training enhances neural efficiency, emotional sensitivity, and creative adaptability, providing empirical evidence that the musician's brain is uniquely wired for dynamic, expressive, and imaginative improvisation

Conclusion

The study concludes that musical creativity and improvisation represent one of the most profound examples of the brain's integrative and adaptive capacity. Neuroscientific evidence confirms that the act of improvisation engages widespread neural networks responsible for perception, emotion, and executive control, while simultaneously reducing overactive self-monitoring to allow spontaneous creative flow. The interplay between the medial prefrontal cortex and limbic regions illustrates how emotion fuels creative behavior, transforming structured knowledge into expressive innovation. Similarly, enhanced communication between auditory, motor, and cerebellar systems enables musicians to coordinate real-time performance with precision and feeling. The findings also demonstrate that musical training significantly refines neural efficiency, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility, promoting long-term neuroplasticity. Furthermore, the correlation between empathy, emotional arousal, and creative fluency underscores the social and affective dimensions of creativity, revealing music's power as both a personal and collective form of expression. By studying music through a neuroscientific lens, researchers gain deeper insight into the mechanisms of human creativity, revealing how the brain generates meaning, connection, and innovation through sound. Musical improvisation is not just an artistic endeavor but a reflection of the brain's remarkable ability to merge logic and emotion—demonstrating that creativity is both a scientific and deeply human phenomenon.

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