

# Improvisation

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## Rationale

One of the great things about teaching improvisation is that some students who may not be technically proficient on their instrument, but have a lot of imagination and good rhythmic sense, are able to play quite inventive melodies. We have to keep in mind that, when improvising, playing a lot of notes is not the most important requirement and in fact, should be avoided at first; what is important is the feel and the rhythmic drive.

Some people think that improvising is a special, innate ability that few people possess and that it cannot be taught. Or, some teachers feel that since they may not have experience improvising they cannot teach it to their students. This seems strange given the fact that many teachers who are not composers have their students compose. Improvisation can, in fact, be thought of as composition -- it is just "rapid composition" (Nettl, 1983, p.6). Improvisation is similar to speaking a language and is something that can be developed with practice. Even the greatest improvisers are not really making up everything that they play the very second that they play it. Great improvisers all have patterns or motives that they often use in their playing (Owens 1974, Kernfeld 1983). Just like when we speak spontaneously about something, chances are we have used some of the phrases or speech patterns before, though perhaps in different contexts or settings, or maybe we manipulate parts of them through various techniques.

Learning to improvise is a process whereby the student becomes familiar with (at first) simple phrases by singing and playing them until they can eventually reproduce them by ear. Along with this, the student gradually develops their "knowledge base" of phrases that they "hear" in their head, as well as their reflexes on their instrument so that they can reproduce these phrases that they hear. As well, they are to be encouraged to vary and manipulate them. It is an

ongoing, cumulative process, just like learning to speak a new language. I have used most of the following activities with grade eight band classes, and some with grade nine and ten. They can, of course, be adapted for use with higher or lower grades, vocal or non-band instruments, depending on the students' experience and abilities.

## Pre-activity/needed skills

When I am getting a class to warmup on a scale, or variations of it, I often refer to notes by scale degree numbers. I try to build up the students' reflexes by doing a kind of call and response, in time.<sup>1</sup> I call out numbers, saying them with the specific rhythmic phrasing desired. You could sing the numbers or play the pitches (on a keyboard) while saying the numbers. Depending on how soon you wanted to start improvising, you could do these pre-activities for as long as you like, eventually not telling the class the numbers, but just singing or playing melodic ideas. You could also go around the class having the students imitate one another. Depending on their success or ability to imitate what they are hearing, you can always limit the number of different notes students can use, (i.e., only use 123, or 135, or 246, etc.). All of the above patterns and phrases should be sung by the class as well as played.

It is important when practicing these phrases, that they are rhythmically interesting and powerful and they are not just patterns of quarter notes or eighth notes because eventually students may improvise the way they practiced. Also, start the phrases on different beats, or offbeats. (Example 1 shows a simple 2 bar phrase, first with just quarter notes, and then the same notes with a more convincing rhythm.) In fact, a few minutes of the warmup could be used to specifically emphasize the importance of rhythm. For these activities you must use accompaniment of some kind, even if only drums. Have the class divide up and play chords (eg. trumpets play the 7th of a chord, altos play the 5th, etc.).

First play the chord on beat 1 of each bar, then on beat 2, then 3, and so on. Also, play the chord on the offbeats. You can also show how the rhythm of a phrase really changes its “meaning” or effectiveness. Play a simple phrase, starting on beat 1, then play the same phrase starting on beat 2. Then try it on the “and” of each beat. These warmups can be ongoing at the start of each class. After the warmup, your students are ready to try some activities that will ease them into improvising.

### Example 1



### Word game

This activity can be done without a rhythm section. If necessary, review the Bb (concert) major scale, or any major scale. Instruct the students to make up a four-syllable sentence and come up with different ways to say that sentence by varying the rhythm. For example: “I like hot dogs.” (See Example 2 for four different versions of this sentence.) Now have students play 1,2,3,1 of the scale, imitating the rhythm of their sentence. The students will end up with a lot of different variations on a simple melodic fragment. Though the pitches remain the same, your students will see that some phrases are more effective than others because of the rhythmic contour. At this point you could have them sequence their melody by starting up a third (3,4,5,3). Sequencing is an important melodic device in improvisation as it helps to maintain familiarity and cohesiveness in a solo, yet also provides interest. Another possibility is that you could let the students choose the ending note of the phrase. I find that if I give students specific parameters to start them off, it helps ease some student’s anxiety. I then gradually remove the restrictions and give them more control.

### Example 2



### Group Improvisation

Group improvisation activities are often effective at the outset of improvising because they alleviate some student anxiety about having to be put on the spot and create something all their own. One group improvisation activity that can be effective is the following. Have one student play whole notes while a second student plays half notes, a third plays quarter notes and a fourth plays eighth notes. This can be structured in many different ways. The most free

version would be for the students to use any notes of the B-flat scale. Or, you can request that the whole note and half note students play 1, 3, 5, or 8 while the quarter note and eighth note students play any notes of the scale. Again, the possibilities, variations, and adaptations are many. You could have one student play just the root (of a B-flat chord), but let them play any rhythm that they want; another student could play the third, etc. Limiting (or eliminating) their pitch choices will give students a chance to concentrate on coming up with inventive, convincing rhythms. I have found that with any improvisational activities some students will want to “go with a friend.” Letting two students improvise simultaneously may create a kind of interactive dialogue, or it might just sound like a mess. However, whatever happens, the nervous student is now improvising.

### Finish the (musical) sentence

Another idea that I have had success with involves using any simple melody that the kids know. Have the students play first phrase (2 measures) of “Twinkle Twinkle.” Now ask for a volunteer to make up her own melodic response in measures 3 and 4 after the class plays the first two measures. You can first impose the restriction that the student must begin the phrase on the 4th degree of the scale and end on the tonic. (Variation: start on 4, end on 8, or start on 2 and end on 5. Any number of variations is possible and you should try many to illustrate different sounds and ideas). After the volunteer plays one example, the entire class could repeat it again. During this activity it is sometimes advantageous to allow two (or more!) students to improvise at the same time.

### Introducing the Blues

At some point in time your warmups that were discussed earlier can involve the blues progression. (After explaining the 12-Bar Blues chord progression, try to make listening to some examples an ongoing activity.) While the rhythm section (or a CD or piano) plays the blues progression, instruct the class to play the roots of each chord; next time around, play the 3rd of each chord, then the 5th, and finally the lowered 7th. If you haven’t already done so, now you must introduce the lowered seventh degree of the B-flat major scale (A-flat) to the class. Also, have the class arpeggiate each chord (1, 3, 5, b7) along with the accompaniment. Now have them play the B-flat scale with the lowered 7th (this creates the B-flat mixolydian scale) for the first four measures. In measure 5, on the IV chord, only change one note – lower the D to D-flat. After they get used to this, have students make up a simple 2 bar phrase (riff) to play over the I chord. Tell them to make sure the phrase contains the third of the chord (D). Also, make sure it is rhythmically strong. Now they should play this phrase twice to cover the first four measures of the blues. When it comes to measure five and the harmony changes (to the IV

chord), they need only change their D's to D-flat's. In measure seven, they may repeat the initial phrase. For the turnaround in measure nine and ten, you could try a few simple options initially, so as not to make things too complicated, have the class (or a section) play the chords. The student(s) who were playing the "melody" could rest at this point or one of them (or all of them!) could improvise. This exercise combines improvisation and composition, but it is primarily meant to teach the students to hear the chord progression and to know the differences (and similarities) between the I and the IV chord.

At this point you could have the class play their melody for two measures and then have someone improvise for two measures. You could repeat this pattern of a type of call and response for the entire twelve measures. You could even have the class come up with a quick arrangement of this song, utilizing the melody, improvising, and chords or backgrounds (always stressing the importance of rhythm). I have used this type of call and response in the many blues type songs that are in some of the standard method books. You can even have the students notate it (after it is memorized) as a follow-up activity.

### The Blues Scale

I often used to teach students the blues scale right off the bat; I would have them use it exclusively for improvising, and that was as far as I went with improvisation (often in guitar classes). Lately I've been using the above approach, probably since my band students are so familiar with the B-flat major scale, but also because I find it lends itself to more melodic playing. Of course, you can change the order or approach or ingredients to fit your own situation or preference. When teaching the blues scale to band students in grade seven, I teach them the G blues scale initially, since they already know these notes. This is really just the relative minor pentatonic of the B-flat major scale, with the added D-flat or C#.2 (Example 3 shows the G Blues scale.)

Example 3



To make this sound like the (G) blues scale, you must have the accompaniment playing in the key of G. If you accompany in B-flat, then you are just playing the B-flat major pentatonic scale (with the chromatic note between 2 and 3 – another effective scale, but not the blues scale; this is more of a Country & Western or sixties Rhythm & Blues sound). Have the rhythm section play a G major chord (not minor)3 and the class play the G blues scale. This sound is

very familiar and usually appeals to the students who are into rock music (no harm in a little relevance now and then). It also appeals to some students who aren't necessarily fans of rock music; they usually get a kick out of playing riffs and patterns with this distinctive sound.

An easy activity to show the contrast between these two scales is to have the rhythm section play the B-flat (or B-flat7) chord for two or four bars and then play the G (or G7) chord. During this time the student should improvise with just the notes of the G blues scale. In fact, they are playing the B-flat major pentatonic (with the chromatic note) during the B-flat chord, and this scale becomes the G blues scale when the accompaniment changes. The contrast in mood and sound is very evident when the chord changes, and many students (and adults) really enjoy it.

### Other Possibilities

This is really just a beginning approach to improvising and there are many things you can focus on as your students begin to get a handle on the basics. When your students begin playing more extended solos (at least 12 bars), you can work on building intensity or excitement in a solo – a kind of compositional approach to shaping the solo as a whole. One common technique of soloists is to build the rhythmic density (play more notes) as the solo progresses. Many simple exercises or activities can be based on this concept. Another common technique is for the pitches of the solo to get higher and higher as the solo builds. Again, many activities can be made up to introduce this concept.

Of course, there are many, many great resources on the market now for teaching improvisation. Most of them are geared toward jazz improvisation, but you and your students don't have to always play with a swing feel. You can still use the melodic/harmonic soloing concepts in many different styles of music. I would like to briefly mention a few excellent resources. Shelley Berg's *Chop Monster* is a fabulous resource. It comes with a CD and students are required to sing and then play the melodic phrases that are on the CD. This way they really internalize the rhythms and inflections of the phrases. Many of my band students were hesitant to sing at first, but after using the CD for a while, one class had memorized many of the singing tracks; they would sing the phrase (without the CD) and a student would answer on her/his instrument. Of course, the Jamey Aebersold resources are staples of many a jazz student and I have mentioned the blues oriented ones in the References. They are play-along CDs with accompanying books. I mention Volume 21 because it has a wealth of material (in the supplementary book) on soloing techniques (eg. suggestions for making a better solo, melodic connecting, chromaticism, how to develop double-time passages). You can also visit Jamey's website to find lots of other resources ([www.jazzbooks.com](http://www.jazzbooks.com)). Also, one of the Bill Dobbins volumes has an indispensable section on

"Principles of Melodic Development" and "Understanding Jazz Rhythm." If you can't find your own copy, it is available in many university libraries that have a jazz program. If you are already experienced in jazz improvisation, you're probably familiar with many of these resources. If you're not, you can learn with your students!

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> A rhythm section or some kind of accompaniment is optional for this activity, but can provide added interest and energy, as well as grounding the phrases in a harmonic framework. The rhythm section could play a simple one chord vamp, or diatonic chords, but they should definitely be encouraged to play different stylistic "feels." This also helps show the students that similar melodic phrases can be played over many different types of music (Goddard, 1993). For an excellent breakdown of the role of the rhythm section, see the resource, *Rhythm Section Workout for Jazz Directors*. Also, all jazz music (except for "Latin" jazz) and some blues music is played with a swing feel. You do not have to use a swing feel for the activities outlined in this article, but you may. For an explanation of swing feel, you may refer to some of the resources mentioned in this article. The best resource, however, is to merely listen to some jazz.

<sup>2</sup> There are many different opinions as to what the blues scale is exactly, but the one I am using here is the one agreed upon by most.

<sup>3</sup> The clash of the major third in the chord and the minor third in the scale is one of the hallmarks of the blues sound (and, specifically, a slight bending of the pitch, to raise the minor third to somewhere in between the minor and major third.

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