

TEACHING IMPROVISATION IN THE SCHOOL ORCHESTRA: CLASSICAL PRACTICAL APPROACHES

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Session sponsored by United Musical Instruments,
Columbus Symphony, and Ohio State University

Introduction

A. Rationale

1. Why should I teach my string students to improvise? – What are the reasons? What are the values of improvising?
 - a. Some answers:
 - 1) allows and encourages creativity for both students and teachers
 - 2) motivates students –not always only those who are first chairs
 - 3) increases listening skills
 - 4) improves pitch discrimination
 - 5) improves intonation
 - 6) improves memorization skills
 - 7) encourages student interest in composition and arranging
 - 8) teaches National Standards for Music: Standard Number 3- Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments
 - 9) teaches National Standards: Standard Number 4: Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines
 - 10) helps develop the complete musical potential of the student and teacher – both teachers and students become better musicians
 - 11) creates another opportunity to reinforce new playing skills
 - 12) its fun!

B. Principles of improvisation are simply imitation and variation

C. A string teacher whose primary background is classical music *can* successfully teach students in the school orchestra to improvise.

Five <i>Practical</i> Approaches to Getting Started
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I. A Creative Drone Approach:

- A. Goal: The orchestra sustains an open string while students “improvise” on a single pitch, by:
 1. adding rhythm
 2. adding dynamics
 3. adding articulation
 4. adding pizzicato

5. adding different sound effects like glissandos and instrument knocks
 6. adding different octave
- B. Drone could be any pitch, e.g. a new pitch just learned
- C. Another approach: *sections* of the orchestra improvise at the same time during the drone, e.g. all the cellos improvise at the same time

II. A Riff Approach

- A. What is a riff? A repeated fragment.
- B. Goal: orchestra plays short riff, student improvises, orchestra repeats riff, student improvises . . .
1. Begin with an open-string four-quarter note riff, then have a student improvise on that one note for four beats. Then have the orchestra repeat the riff, followed by a different student improvising, repeat the riff . . .
 2. Variation: Use a riff and related improvisations that involve 2 notes, then 3 notes . . .
 2. Variation: Use major, minor, or pentatonic scales, tetrachords, or arpeggios as the riff.
 3. Variation: Orchestra plays a short melody as a riff. Student improvisers vary the melody by changing the rhythm, order, dynamics, or articulation, of the notes.
 4. Variation: Use a simple melodic fragment as the riff. The improvisations can be any freely created melody that is the same length and in the same key as the riff melody.

III. A Call and Response or Question and Answer Approach

- A. Goal: melodic fragment played by one student and answered by another student
1. A call/question is a short melodic phrase in one key that does not end on the tonic; a response/answer is a phrase in the same key that ends on the tonic. For ultimate safety have the class sustain an open string tonic pitch during the call and response. Begin by having students volunteer or carefully select students who will be successful.
 2. Variation: One player gets to choose another student to respond/answer. The two players toss questions and answers back and forth to each other more than once – like having a conversation!
 3. Variation: One student begins with a call and then selects another player to answer. After playing, the answering student begins a new call/response sequence by selecting someone to play a new call. The sequence continues throughout the orchestra.

4. Variation: Record a melody on an endless loop tape or sequencer and have students improvise a similar melody on top of the recorded melody
5. Variation: Begin with a melody as the call. The response must be a variation of that melody that ends on the tonic, produced by changing rhythms of the original melody, adding ornamentation, etc.
6. Variation: A section of the orchestra determines and plays together a call/question and then selects another student or section to respond/answer

IV. A Chordal Approach

- A. Goal: Ensemble plays triads while soloist/soloists improvise(s) above the chords. Suggested steps:
 1. Ensemble plays triads by dividing up the pitches in a primary or secondary triad among the sections of the orchestra. Assign one pitch to each section.
 2. Develop a chord progression played by the orchestra: each section of the orchestra plays one pitch of the chord. Use chord symbols indicated by leaders' fingers or written on the board.
 3. Each section of the orchestra improvises on its chord pitch, changing rhythm, dynamics, timbre, or articulation. Then add one more chordal note at a time, until each section has an opportunity to improvise using every pitch in a chord.
 4. Orchestra sustains a chord and each student improvise short melodies based on the chord tones. The opportunity to play his/her improvised melody may be continuously passed among the students .
 5. The orchestra plays a chord progression indicated by the hand signals of the teacher while individual students improvise short melodies based on the chord tones.

V. A Rhythmic Ostinato Approach

- A. Goal: Soloists improvise while accompanied by a rhythmic ostinato. Three steps:
 1. Orchestra pizzicatos a simple rhythmic ostinato pattern using the tonic and third and/or fifth pitches of a chord, e.g.
 2. Students improvise short melodies based on the chord tones and/or scales
 3. One section or a soloist plays an improvised melody accompanied by the rest of the orchestra plucking the ostinato melody
 4. Variation: Ostinato used as a riff between soloists or orchestra sections
 5. Variation: Additional chords can be added to produce a chord progression using an ostinato rhythm to accompany soloists, e.g. a chord progression comprised of I, IV, and V chords, played in an ostinato rhythm, with a soloist improvising above the chords.

RESOURCES

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Printed

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