

IMPROVING YOUR ENSEMBLE BY IMPROV(E)SATION

Why Improvise?

- First, we improvise to play, have fun, and have an experience: it is called “playing music” for a reason! Improvisation is music for the experienter, not so much the listener.
- Secondly, for its many musicianship benefits. Improvisation:
 - allows freedom from the strictures of notated music
 - allows for individual and communal experimentation
 - encourages freedom from making ‘mistakes’ by just trying things!
 - opens the door for discovery of unrealized potential, ideas, talents, means of expression, techniques, sounds
 - dissolves fear, apprehension
 - builds confidence, self-expression, self-knowledge
 - creates a community where each participant is responsible to all other participants in a profound way
 - fosters sonic imagination
 - helps teachers and conductors benefit from the careful monitoring of their own reactions to what students are playing
- Thirdly: technically and musically, improvisation helps students
 - build a better ear—playing what one can hear and imagine
 - self-edit their playing
 - learn how to make artistic decisions in the moment
 - learn how to communicate constructive feedback on their playing and the playing of fellow students
 - build flexibility in the practice of their musical development

JUDGMENT AND UNCONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS ARE THE GREATEST KILLERS OF CREATIVITY!

Where to start/rules of engagement

- Get whole room in deep listening mode: put notebooks, phones, etc. away; get present and in your body.
- ****Ear-clearing exercise*: place palms of your hands firmly over your ears and drum on the back of your skull with your fingers. Pay attention to the change in “silence” after you have done this.
- Instructor moderates and facilitates rather than controls
- Move away from listening “for” things and towards listening “to” things.
- Create a safe environment in which there is no judgment.
- Create a questioning atmosphere: “How did you think that worked?” or “What would you choose to do differently?”
- Move from judgment (that was “good” or “bad”), to preference (I “liked” or “didn’t like” x, y or z).
- Encourage the students to be specific in their comments: “that was cool” becomes “what was cool about it (in musical terms)?”

**YOUR PRIMARY INSTRUMENT IS YOUR EARS.
THE THING YOU PLAY BECOMES YOUR NOISEMAKER:
THE MORE YOUR EAR BECOMES THE MASTER, THE MORE FAITHFUL
YOUR MUSICAL INSTRUMENT BECOMES THE SERVANT!**

Doing, Listening, Responding

- ‘Musts’
 - The facilitator’s/teacher’s contract with the student is this: “I will let you make the musical decisions, or the group will make the decisions, in discussion.”
 - Facilitator is there to guide groups to engage what comes naturally to them, and nurture them into those things that don’t come so naturally.
 - Discuss what we liked first: give students the first opportunity to respond to what they just did.
 - Record improvisations and listen to them on the spot (things feel different in “performer mode” than they do in “listener mode.” Post recordings online for students to reference.
 - Facilitator helps students identify what they are “bracketing out.” If students are members of the Chicago Youth Symphony, they may feel like they should not play rock and roll or jazz things like walking bass. In fact, it is part of their toolbox and may be just the right thing for the moment.
 - Encourage students to draw from their ENTIRE musical experience.
- Consider that there are no mistakes, only musical events that are not played with conviction or confidence. If it sounds wrong, play it a second time...a third time. By then, it has become a motive!
- Nothing need be “wrong” but may lead to a missed opportunity. The instructor is there to help students see opportunities they may have missed in the moment.
- NEVER: forget to be the musician that you are!
- Help students to develop a response mechanism that leads to always making choices for MUSICAL reasons.
- Try to keep the students out of their “thinking” brain, and just reacting. If you invent exercises, keep the parameters simple and few!

**HONOR YOURSELF, ALONG WITH THE PROCESS,
AND THE MUSIC WILL TAKE CARE OF ITSELF!**

Toolbox: Ideas and Suggestions, to Get Things Started

- It’s not about notes; it’s about sounds.
- Listen
- Match pitch, play consonance, play dissonance
- Create rhythms
- Explore different timbres
- Vocalize
- Silence is part of the music
- Record yourself

- Become aware of self-limiting thoughts about what you should or should not play, or are not capable of expressing, and go for it.
- Pass the musical idea
- Move to a different set up between each improvisation
- Play with the lights off
- Play in a circle facing out
- Pick one player to “lead” the improvisation
- Limit the number of players at a given time (i.e. maximum of 3 players playing at once)
- Orchestrate: all strings, then all brass, then all winds, then combine, etc.
- Give them an ambient electronic track to play along with
- Invent improvisations with a single simple instruction (i.e., play only fast things; play sustained ideas followed by silence; do the opposite of the person next to you, etc.). Keep the parameters simple and only one or two. Keep in mind that they are thinking about following the guiding principle while doing it within the context of what the others are doing.
 - Improvise around a simple tune: Row Your Boat, Swing Low, Amazing Grace, etc.
 - “Improvise conducting” with gestures, cue-cards (such as note names, or numbers that can be interpreted however the players want)

LEARN TO LISTEN CLOSELY WITH MIND, BODY, SPIRIT, AND EMOTIONS

Modes of response:

- Support an idea (accompany, ground bass, ostinato, groove)
- Repeat an idea (canon, imitation, fugue, round, etc.)
- Develop an existing idea (transpose, invert, extract interval content, retrograde, expand, telescope, truncate, ornament, etc.)
- Add a complementary idea (countersubject)
- Agree/disagree with an idea (counterpoint)
- Subvert an idea (cut off, or slowly shift an idea in a musical way)
- Rest! – Listen without responding!

ONCE WE PRACTICE HOW TO RECEIVE FROM OTHERS, AND GIVE IN OUR OWN AUTHENTIC WAY, WE CAN MAKE MUSIC TOGETHER THROUGH COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

