

**Making Something From Nothing:  
Group Exercises to Build Improvisational Confidence**  
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Taylor Morris

As a musician who didn't start exploring improvisation until after college, I found myself simultaneously *limited* in situations where I had to admit I didn't improvise and *overwhelmed* by the prospect of becoming "an improviser." Fortunately, through a series of fortuitous musical experiences and interactions, I've come to see improvisation as much different (and more understandable) than I had originally thought. I've assembled this handout with some ideas and exercises that have been helpful for my students, my colleagues, and myself—I hope you will find it helpful, too!

My approach to teaching improvisation is not based in a certain musical style or form, but rather is a means of developing the comfort and ability to create something from nothing. Many of the breakthroughs in my own understanding have subsequently informed how I approach teaching improvisation. And, likewise, this approach has been heavily affected by my experiences working with students (of various ages) and colleagues in a variety of improvisational settings.

Here are some key things to keep in mind about improvisation:

- 1) Improvisation, ultimately, is about freedom with restraint.
- 2) Remember that each and every day we're improvising in everything we do! Building improvisational skills in music is just as much about practicing the act of improvisation as it is about cultivating a mindset.
- 3) There are no mistakes in improvisation, only choices. You might like some choices and really dislike others, but only through making and analyzing choices can you begin to refine your understanding and tastes.

A helpful way to think about harmonic and rhythmic restrictions in improvisation, as taught by Dr. Victor Lin at the Mike Block String Camp (July 2012):

**Types of Restriction in Musical Improvisation**

No Harmonic Rhythmic	Harmonic Rhythmic
No Harmonic No Rhythmic	Harmonic No Rhythmic

## The Rhythm Machine

Musicians sit in a circle. Once the rules for the machine are decided (e.g., any harmonic or rhythmic restrictions), one person starts the machine by looping/repeating a musical idea. After a few bars, the next musician adds in something else that fits within the rules of the machine. Eventually, everyone around the circle becomes a part of the machine. Once everyone has been playing for a few bars, the person who started the machine drops out. Then, every 2-4 bars, the rest of the musicians drop out in the order they joined, leaving the last person to join the machine with a 2 bar solo.

This basic model—one person starts, others join, and then everyone drops out in order—can be adapted and altered in numerous ways, and is flexible for both young beginners and advanced professionals. Here are some variations I've developed, in ascending order of complexity:

- Create rhythms without instruments (e.g., clapping, snapping, etc.)
- Rhythmically speak names or words (e.g., Tay-lor Tay-lor Taaay-looor)
- Create non-pitched, percussive sounds using instruments (e.g., tapping, knocking, chopping)
- Allow pitches, but create restrictions on what notes can be used:
  - o only one pitch
  - o a few notes
  - o one octave
  - o all notes from a scale in first position
  - o only in third position
  - o different types of scales (e.g., pentatonic, blues, modal)
- Restrict who can do what (e.g., every other students does something percussive)
- Push creative limits:
  - o Build a rhythm machine and then take solos on top of it after it has been built
  - o Set chord changes that happen over a form (e.g., 4 bars of G and 4 bars of D)
  - o Ask students to do something that is different from what the person before did in rhythm, register, tone, or style
  - o Create a machine based around a prompt, tone, or theme (e.g., scary, underwater, a spring day)
  - o Don't give any musical directions or restrictions

*Adapted from and built upon ideas and lessons in Alice Kay Kanack's "Creative Ability Development" curriculum and experiences at Community MusicWorks' Institute for Musicianship & Public Service.*

## Important Lessons & Takeaways from the Rhythm Machine

**It demonstrates, in a very clear way, the power just one person can have in a group.**

Encourage students to notice how their perception of the machine changes when certain students join or drop out.

**It allows every student to participate at his or her own ability and comfort level.** Students are more likely to feel competent because they are not being asked to play anything beyond their technical abilities (e.g., a piece in orchestra).

**It exposes new strengths and challenges for every student.** Sometimes the least advanced players in a room are the most confident and creative.

**It encourages students to explore what it means to have a voice through an instrument.** Sometimes shy students are the loudest musically!

**It creates a space for connection.** Because it is such a social activity, it allows students to engage interpersonally through music.

**It highlights the necessity of different musical roles.** Often, students will choose to drone or tap out quarter notes when they realize that something simple is needed for the benefit of the group.

**It builds a student's listening abilities.** Contributing effectively to an improvisation means that you *must* be listening to those around you.

**It helps students to develop a stronger sense of pitch relationships.** Students start to hear the qualities of certain notes in a scale.

**It fosters the most important skills of a chamber musician.** Improvisation in this setting asks musicians to constantly listen, respond, and adapt their own playing.

**It develops a student's autonomy.** Through actively making choices, students build confidence and self-reliance with their instruments.

## About Taylor Morris

Hailed by a class of 2nd graders as “wreely nice and kind” and “the coolest man on erth,” Arizona native **Taylor Morris** enjoys blurring the line between violin and fiddle. After studying classical violin at Arizona State University with Dr. Katie McLin, he spent four years touring the world as one of five fiddlers with Barrage, a world-music violin troupe based out of Canada. His travels, both with Barrage and personally, have led to performances in 48 states and 13 countries with musicians from a multitude of backgrounds. Strongly believing we can learn more about the world through collaboration with others, Taylor actively pursues musical projects in different genres. Currently, he is part of a Tricia & Taylor, a genre-bending violin/fiddle duo with concert violinist Tricia Park, and a member of The Sound Accord, a string sextet that creates vibrant arrangements of folk music. Other performers with whom Taylor has recently collaborated include: multi-style cellists Mike Block, Rushad Eggleston, & Natalie Haas; fiddlers Hanneke Cassel, Casey Driessen, Alex Hargreaves, Jeremy Kittel, & Lauren Rioux; arts educator Steve Seidel; and the Tetra String Quartet.

Off of the stage, Taylor obtained a master's in education from Harvard University and is a passionate advocate for arts education. Since 2000, Taylor's teaching has taken him into classrooms around the country, creating music-inspired art with kindergarteners and leading workshops at the University of Notre Dame, University of the Pacific, Millikin University, and Arizona State University. As a kid, Taylor loved going to summer camps; as an adult, Taylor *still* loves going to summer camps. In addition to having taught at camps in Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Dakota, and South Carolina, he also directs StringPlay, his own camp for young musicians in the Phoenix area. During the year, Taylor's main educational outlet is serving as a founding co-director of the Gilbert Town Fiddlers, an extracurricular high school fiddle group that collaborates to create its own arrangements for performance. Through his teaching, Taylor is ultimately on a serious mission to keep music as fun as possible by working with students and educators to explore the incredible variety of ways to make music with string instruments.

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