

Creativity from the Beginning - Ideas for Teaching Improvisation to Young Musicians

Timothy J. Groulx, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor of Music, University of Evansville

Why improvise?

- Educational institutions and music programs are often very focused on *convergent* thinking: “get it right”, “do what I say”, “find the right answer”, where there is usually only one right answer.
- Not enough focus on *divergent* thinking: “what would you do?” “what do you like?” “how do you feel?” “express yourself”. Exercises creative abilities and allow students to express themselves.

Overarching concepts in improvisation

- Set parameters – too much freedom can be scary
 - Start with narrow parameters (e.g. rhythmic improvisation with only quarter and eighth notes, no syncopation)
 - You will know when the students are ready to move onto more complex “vocabulary” in their improvisation
- Focus on the *aural* and not the *visual* – when you have the choice, use rote, not note

Orienting the mind towards creativity: fun activities to promote divergent thinking instead of convergent thinking

- Three-paperclip sculptures
- Group sentences
- Draw a given image using only a certain few shapes
- Create something using Lego blocks

Rhythmic improvisation

- Clapping or patting rhythms individually
- Responsive rhythms – echoing, then providing a different response
- Multiple rhythmic lines simultaneously, consistent pulse

Melodic improvisation

- 2-pitch improvisation: use 5 and 3 in your favorite key (B-flat for band, and G for orchestra?)
- 3-pitch improvisation: 5, 3, and 6 – start with basic rhythms and increase difficulty gradually
- 4-pitch improvisation: 5, 3, 6, and 1 – allow students ample time to get used to vocabulary
- Pentatonic improvisation: 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 – you may stay with this particular vocabulary for a very long time, as it is both safe and relatively un-restricting. Avoiding the tendency-tones 4 and 7 prevents disagreeable dissonances and voice-leading pitfalls. Shortcut to pentatonic for mallet percussion/piano: use “black keys”
- Minor Pentatonic: same exact pitches as above, but you call “6” home instead of “1”
- Blues: same exact pitches as minor pentatonic, but you can also include #2

The Role of the Bass - Usually (but not necessarily) a lower-pitched instrument.

- Rhythmic improvisation on scale degree 1
- Focus on 1, but occasionally use 5 for variety
- Can evolve to be melodic improvisation, but will typically focus more on 1 and be more repetitive in nature

Adding the harmonic dimension (using only one chord)

- Melody + rhythm + drone – sustained long tones, or rhythmic improvisation on a single pitch
- Melody + rhythm + chord – allow students playing the “harmony” role to improvise using only chord tones (e.g. 1, 3, and 5)

Combining Roles

- Rhythm + melody
- Rhythm + melody + bass line (melodic improvisation focused on *do*, often on lower-pitched instruments)
- Rhythm + melody + bass line + harmony
- Simple rhythm + complex rhythm + melody + bass line + harmony (two-part rhythms might be analogous to typical bass drum and snare drum parts)

Using more than one chord

- Within pentatonic framework: Explain to students that you have been using 1 and 6 as “home,” but you can also use 4 or 5 as home as well, and each of those includes new notes you can use but also has some notes to avoid.
 - 4 home: 4, 5, 6, 1, 2 students can now use 4 but cannot use 3
 - 5 home: 5, 6, 7, 2, 3, 4 students can now use 7 but must avoid 1
 - Write I, IV, and V⁷ on the board, and teach the students to associate your original activities with I, 4 home as IV, and 5 home as V⁷.
- Once students are comfortable in each of these new homes in isolation, begin switching between tonal areas from one activity to the next. Writing the Roman numerals on the board and switching between them by pointing to which tonal area you want them to use can be a fun activity when students are ready
- Explain that no matter what chord you are pointing at, 2, 5, and 6 will always be safe to use. You might want to write a reminder of which pitches to avoid under the chord symbol:

	I	IV	V ⁷
Avoid:	4, 7	3, 7	1

Stylistic improvisation

- Have students get in pairs or groups of three, pick a style and a vocabulary (e.g. blues, pentatonic, etc.), and play together, or in the style of a conversation
- Simple folk tune melodies varied in different ways: Mary Had a Little Lamb in 6/8 or asymmetrical meter, in minor mode, or in a given style (e.g. heavy metal, country, lullabye, gospel, dubstep)
- Develop accompanying harmony parts, bass line, and drum parts to match the melody style
- Play a familiar melody but do it in a way that expresses a specific emotion: see if peers can figure out what emotion that is
- Write emotions on note cards, have students draw a card and play an existing melody to convey that emotion, or improvise a melody of their own to convey that emotion: have students guess the emotion

Vocal improvisation to develop aural skills

- Improvise using a limited set of intervals

For further reading:

Azzara & Grunow (2006) *Developing Musicianship through Improvisations* - GIA Publications