



# Youth Orchestra

## Why Improvisation Should be Part of Classical Musicians' Training

by Cristina Seaborn

My father once told me that classical music is the only good kind of music. I was a teenager at the time, and all I could think was, "You haven't heard *Yes*, or *Emerson, Lake and Palmer*, or *Led Zeppelin*." I gave him the Keith Jarrett double album, thinking he would enjoy jazz piano. He gave me opera CD's in return.

My father is a classical pianist and I am a violinist. We've played classical violin and piano duets together all my life. But as concertmaster of the 8th grade orchestra, I started wanting to play notes that weren't on the page. I took my first jazz improvisation class at age seventeen. Since then, I feel my life work is to bring improvisation into the classical music repertoire.

I spent two years learning to improvise. I learned the fun of exploration on one scale or one chord, including melodic and rhythmic roles in the jam session. Some improvising musicians couldn't read music, but they could improvise on one or two chords for half an hour. They have a visual approach to the instrument, knowing scale patterns as shapes and designs on the fingerboard or keyboard.

Learning to improvise music improved my understanding of what I am reading in a composition. The composer carves his ideas and shapes them like a sculptor. As an improvising musician, I can get into the creative flow inside the composer's head and anticipate the melodic and harmonic progression. I love being surprised by unexpected key changes and atypical melodic excursions.

Improvisation has been around for a long time in classical music. Composers such as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven improvised well. Since the turn of the century, classical cadenzas, or the improvised part in a concerto, have been written down by the great concerting musicians. Back then, the cadenza was a completely improvised solo. Today you

would do so-and-so's cadenza, because how could you do a better solo than these great musicians? It is a rare individual who still writes his or her own cadenza. Out of respect for Szigeti, Heifetz, Kreutzer and other great concert violinists, the written cadenzas have now become classics too.

In 1994, the American National Standards for Music Education included improvisation as an important part of music education. We should challenge ourselves to tap into the naturally creative part of ourselves and take a chance

while learning something new—whatever it is—reading music or improvising in music. Become a well-rounded musician and straddle the fence!

*Cristina Seaborn is pursuing a Masters in Orchestral Conducting at Saint Cloud State University. She is interested in jazz string ensembles, gives workshops on improvisation, and writes for string orchestra. Contact her for copies of her self-published arrangements in fiddle, Celtic, Cajun and jazz styles. †*

### Recommended Materials on Improvisation

Hal Crook, *How to Improvise*, Advance Music, ISBN #3-89221-031-4. Available at Berklee College of Music Bookstore, Boston, MA 617-266-1400 x2402. Hal Crook breaks down improvisation into about 100 different subjects and has a one week practice schedule for each subject. He demystifies improvisation. Some of his ideas are: play for one measure, rest for one measure; play for two measures, rest for one measure; play for two measures, rest for two measures; play for two measures, rest for three measures. Now you start to feel what its like to play against the four bar phrase by doing a five measure sequence. It's kind of fun. This is done while there is an accompaniment of a simple chord progression.

Jody Harmon, *JIME (Jazz Improvisation Made Easy)* and *Improvise*. From Jody Harmon, P.O. Box 186, 301 Littleton Road, Westford, MA 01886, 978-692-5930. Jody Harmon has written specifically for strings and uses easy string keys. Her books are transposed for violin, viola, cello and include a CD or cassette tape. She asks you to imitate her as she plays a two measure phrase on the recording, accompanied by a jazz ensemble. The

songs are catchy and playing scales with the CD sounds cool. She breaks down jazz ideas into one and two bar ideas that you can piece together to make your whole solo. *Improvise* is for students at Suzuki Book 3 level and *JIME* is for students at Suzuki Book 5 level.

Mark O'Connor, *The Championship Years*, Mel Bay Publications. These are transcriptions of Mark O'Connor's solos from his early teens when he improvised fiddle tunes and was encouraged to find variations by his teacher, Benny Thomasson.

Matt Glaser's Master Thesis, *100 Variations on Sally Goodin's as played by Mark O'Connor*, 617-266-1400 x2296. Matt Glaser analyzes 100 variations on one melody in the Texas Swing style.

Jamey Abersold, *Learn to Improvise Jazz in Every Key, Volume 24*. Play-along Book & 2 recording set. Jamey Abersold has a huge line of play-along jazz books and recordings. This book includes the blues scale, pentatonic scale, chromatic scale, and typical major scale licks in each key, starting with horn keys with flats. Transpositions are for B $\flat$  and E $\flat$  instruments, and bass clef.