

# All-State: Faith Farr show us Implementing Improvisation — without the Blues!

by Lisa Lawrence

One of the challenges facing us today are the recent changes in graduation standards. One of the requirements for music that seems to be one of the more challenging tasks for us as teachers is the implementation of improvisation in the classroom. Not knowing much jazz or blues makes it even more difficult. At the August 1999 MNSOTA All-State Teachers Conference, Faith Farr, a cello instructor at MacPhail Center for the Arts (Minneapolis) gave a workshop on how to improvise—without blues or jazz—in the classroom. Her ideas were simple to grasp, safe to try, fun to do, and all while developing improvising skills.

## I. Attitude

First off, we need to prove to our kids that this is fun, and model a positive attitude. So repeat after me:

“I am a musician.” ... very good!  
 “I *am* a musician.” ... great!  
 One more time:  
 “I am a *musician*.”

“There is music in me.” ... good!  
 “There *is* music in me” ... yes!  
 “There is *music* in me that no one has heard.”

Now that we’ve convinced ourselves—I mean, our kids—we are able to start. Keeping in mind that there are no wrong notes, just “spicy surprises,” let us keep a good tone, and play all together (there is safety in numbers, you know!) Experimenting all together encourages confidence when everyone is busy concentrating on their own music. It also establishes the idea that “we’re all in this together.”

## II. The Basics

Faith Farr has set her ideas up in developmental stages. She starts with the basics: call and response. Use one note, open strings, silly sounds (gliss, whistling, knocking, bow techniques).

1. Teacher-students: imitation (with variations: upside down, faster, slower, two times, louder, softer, etc.)

2. Teacher-students: question and answer



Faith Farr

One bar GM ostinato      Two bar GM ostinato; end with percussive tap

Chord progression in AM

Chord progression in DM

Suggested Ostinati for Melodic Improvisation in a Key

Prepare for teaching improvisation by devising ostinati to support the improvisation. Use patterns that are easy to play and easy to learn by ear. Something slightly dissonant or with a funky rhythm is more interesting than a simple consonant chord. Use a percussion tap or chord as an obvious aural signal that the pattern has ended. Once they are ready for harmonic progressions, have students read the chord chart.

3. Teacher-students: statement, copy and answer

4. Use a percussive ostinato to keep a beat

5. Do the above as duets or trios

When the children get to make up and use their own ideas, there are a ton of different techniques they can use: legato, pizzicato, accents, staccato, spiccato, tremolo, rests, flautando, rhythmic variations, etc.

1. Start out with a one-note song

2. Go to two or three note songs

3. A great way to spice up the D scale!

4. One-on-One song: With one finger on one string, try to pick out a simple melody such as *Twinkle*, or *Mary had a Little Lamb*. (The melody is not improvised, obviously, but it is great training for the fingers to do what the ear wants to hear!)

5. After the kids have had a little experience doing these activities, you can give them a little more freedom by putting the kids into Instant Quartets. Each child chooses one “secret note” and can not change it one they have decided. Watching and communicating

with each other, they improvise a quartet. Imitation, repetition, matching styles, call and response, etc., can all be used between the members of the quartet to explore the (likely) dissonance their “secret notes” have created. This activity not only draws out creative juices, but also the need to be a leader and a follower at the same time.

### III. Within a Key

Pick a key, any key; play the scale; figure out the finger patterns on each string. Play any of those notes! (You can use a finger chart, if needed.)

1. Pick a key, any key, and make an ostinato part for the class to play underneath the improvisation. (See the sidebar for examples.) Have the class play the ostinato part while you demonstrate.

2. Refine the improvisation: start on tonic and end on tonic. Establish 2 or 4 bars phrases by having half the group play the ostinato for 2 or 4 bars then improvise for 2 or 4 bars while the other half of the group improvises and

then plays the ostinato (respectively).

3. Start on tonic in each measure; 2, 4 bars

4. Repetition: choose a 2 bar melody (use one of the kid’s improv, repertoire or a familiar song) and call it A. Repeat it (A), improv (B), and play A again (AABA form)

5. Practice ending: (A, A’) Play A, then play something similar but end on tonic.

6. Devise an ostinato with a chord progression (e.g., I-IV-V-I). For improv, start each measure on the root of that chord or use notes of each chord.

7. Using more complex harmonic progressions (e.g., based on Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*), have students improvise using the root of each chord on the down beats.

8. Cadenza Improv: choose 2 measures of a familiar melody (*Twinkle*, Suzuki *Allegro*, repertoire excerpt, Mozart Sonata, be creative!) and go with it! Use trills, flips, sequences, inversion, repetition, augmentation, diminution,

tempo changes, ornaments, etc.

I really enjoyed Faith Farr’s workshop and learned some fantastic ways not only to simplify improvisation, but to implement it while having fun and introducing challenges (for the kids and the teachers!) at the same time. All of these things obviously would not be used within one lesson, but over time and development as musicians. If beginners start right away, the fear of experimentation will diminish much sooner. By the time they are in high school, it will be no problem. It incorporates fabulous ear training of melodic, harmonic, and intervallic identification and theory, as well as trains them to communicate with each other, to be leaders, to be followers, to be *musicians* and to discover the music within themselves that no one has ever heard.

*Lisa Lawrence teaches at Jackson Middle School in Champlin MN. Faith will be repeating this workshop at the MMEA clinic in February. †*