

All-State: Improvisation: Keeping it Safe and Simple

presented by Matt Turner
reported by Mary Gagnon

Matt Turner's central idea in teaching improvisation is to set up situations in which the students feel safe to improvise. They are led gradually from being encouraged to play whatever they like with no written music and no rules, to styles and parameters within a specific tune and genre. The key to comfort is safety, and that leads towards both greater ability and greater creativity.

The first steps are solely to get students to produce sound. There are no restrictions regarding rhythm, length, style, or key. Matt took us through several exercises of this sort, starting with drone pieces and leading towards exploring nontraditional sounds on the instrument.

Drone pieces on D

We started with a drone piece. We all closed our eyes, and one person was asked to play an open D pedal tone. Matt went around the room and tapped individual players on the shoulder to signal them to play a solo. Matt gave us no other instructions, saying this was not about scales, triads, or style. It was about feeling immediately successful. With eyes closed, students can feel anonymous and therefore more free to play whatever they want. With no rules, students can make up whatever they choose, with no pressure to follow complex patterns. Failure is impossible as there is no way to do this incorrectly.

Taqasim

Next was a variation on this, the Arabic form called Taqasim. Matt first taught us a Hijaz scale (H, W+H, H, W, H, W, W; where H = half step, W = whole step). He then asked the orchestra to drone on the tonic pitch, while he and a volunteer took turns improvising, using the scale. Matt characterized the Taqasim as a call and response form, but without rhythmic restrictions. He said that at first, one could use two or three adjacent pitches instead of the whole scale, and later add parameters such as range, length, repetitions, question-answer, and stylistic considerations such as slides and trills. Other scales or collections of pitches may also be used. At this stage, Matt feels, it's just important to get the students to improvise.

Sound exploration

We then switched gears into exploring different sounds on the instrument. As an initial exercise to get us thinking, Matt challenged us to come up with a sound that had never been played before on our instruments. There was some laughter in the room at that statement, but we all gamely made an attempt, only to be told with a smile that all of our ideas were unfortunately unoriginal. He had us try again, with the restriction that we couldn't use our bows. Yet a third time, we went around the room, without being able to use our bows or hit the instrument. Many people came up with very different sounds, especially by the third attempt. This in some senses was Matt's technique in microcosm — start with no rules, just to get started, and gradually build in restrictions to deepen and enhance creativity.

Charades

With our new palette of sounds, we were ready for the next activity: charades. In groups of four or five, we were given just a few minutes to come up with a story and discuss how to portray it using only our instruments and mime motions. We were not allowed to practice nor would we be allowed to talk on stage. The rules were starting to increase, but there still were a lot of freedom and fun within them. Concepts ranged from roasting marshmallows over a campfire to a baseball game.

Card pieces

Matt also showed us a variation of charades in which he wrote a word on a piece of paper, then said to the group "1-2-3-GO!" without giving them time to practice, plan, or even think. He then asked the group, "How did you know what to do?" The answer was obvious to the experienced musicians on stage — they listened. From the concept given by Matt (factory, sunset, train), they were able to immediately get hold of ideas of intensity, tempo, and feel. By listening to the interpretations of others in their group, they were able to find their place in the story.

We talked about how this idea can be expanded into creating alternate musical notation and compositions. Matt talked

about card pieces. On each card is a notation symbol, direction, or picture that students create with a sound that students create to go with it. The conductor (teacher or student) holds up cards in any order they wish to various parts of the orchestra. This could also be done with a conductor using hand signals and body motions to communicate, with the orchestra interpreting with what they think sounds appropriate.

Improvising in a style

After students have explored sound creation and feel comfortable performing solos, it is time to introduce improvising in a particular style. Again, Matt encouraged us to pare things down and begin with just a few notes and not worry too much about teaching the theory behind the chord progressions. That can come later. He also suggests starting with pieces using straight rhythms and not swing, as swing is very style-specific to jazz and can be difficult for students to get the hang of.

We first read a piece of Matt's in a rock style called *Scalin' Back*. It is in the key of C, which is generally a familiar one to students. The piece has a specific place written in for solos to occur. We next went through *Stargazer*, also written by Matt, but a slow "Ellingtonesque" ballad. For this piece, Matt gave us suggestions about how to assist students with improvising over given chords. He suggested helping students find a common key that these chords may all be found in. In this instance, for most of the chords, this key was C. Students can then concentrate on improvising in the key of C. For the chords that don't fit into C, plan what note you can land on when you get to those chords. Again, this simplifies proceedings and helps students find a sense of security when confronted with complex chords like Fmaj7 and G7 (b9). Theory may be introduced, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming.

Our next piece, *Puerto de Libertad* by Randy Sabien, doesn't have a place written into it for solos to occur. Matt suggested extracting a two bar section with a good groove and turning it into a vamp for solos to occur over the top.

Our last piece was *Levitation*, also by Randy Sabien, and it was the first piece

of the morning with swinging eighth notes. Matt first warmed us up with call and response. He played two or three pitches, and we imitated him. He gradually increased the number of pitches, adding slides, swing, and growls. He didn't tell us how to play in the style so much as he showed us. Matt then began talking about style in earnest — short, dry, snappy staccatos; gritty, rough, and into the string. Use of vibrato is rare, and swung eighth notes should be towards the middle and upper half of the bow. The faster the tempo, the

flatter the swing. Matt also talked to us about the blues form, and blues scales.

By the end of the session, the teachers in the room seemed to have a good idea what to do with their students. Matt's main point of keeping improvisation safe and simple — to start slowly and simply and gradually build — appeared to make sense to everyone.

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2006. Prior to that, she taught elementary and middle school orchestra for ten years in Oshkosh, WI. She is a former member and personnel manager of the Oshkosh Symphony Orchestra under the direction of William LaRue Jones, and a current board member of the Wisconsin Cello Society. Her orchestras have performed with fiddle player Randy Sabien, cellist Matt Turner, concertina player Jim Wilfabrt, and violist Nicole Swanson, Miss Minnesota 2006. †