

## All-State: Improvisation—Where do I start?

presented and reported by Cristina Seaborn

*Cristina Seaborn presented 3 eclectic styles sessions at the All-State Teachers Workshop. This session on improvisation was designed for orchestra teachers who have no improvisation experience and need steps to be able to teach their students.*

Using material from Jody Harmon's *Improvise!* we played along with the CD for a quick overview of her method. Jody has combined Suzuki approaches to listening and rhythmic repetition so that this book works for orchestra teachers. Students need to be at the level of Suzuki Book 3.

Starting with a 2-octave G scale, we warm up our fingers and play the pattern in tune. The first piece is called *Sea Breeze*, using a simple two-chord pattern and simple melody. Jody gives a sample solo that you can listen to or try to play along with.

Using comprehensible steps, she gives a simple two-measure idea and two measures of rest. The student improvises during the two-measure rest, with the idea of having a conversation. To start improvising, I recommend using one note, and coming up with a different rhythm every time. It is important to focus on rhythm, and also to start to feel the length of a 4-measure phrase. With this call and answer, the 4-measure phrase starts to percolate into your conscience.

The next step is called trading fours, where Jody plays a 4-measure phrase and you repeat back the same length phrase. You can start using two notes or three notes to create your improvisation, but keep focusing on rhythm.

There are many ways to create variations on a simple melody, by changing one note or one rhythm, to eventually using quite a few ornaments. I like the idea of starting off simply and gradually exploring until you get to the absurd. Somewhere in the middle is where you find musical taste, but until you go to both ends of the spectrum, you might not find your own voice.

The left-brain approach of knowing the chord arpeggio is exercised, adding passing tones. You are always a step away from the right note in the chord, so relax and explore when you are improvising. Use the note as a step to the one you heard in your head.

There is an interesting thing that happens to a person as you try to connect the melody you hear in your head with your instrument.

At first, the connection might not be as pure as you would like. You will get closer to executing the notes you hear in your musical mind as you improvise more. The secret is letting go of your left brain and developing your right brain. Then you balance the use of both together.

The final step Jody Harmon creates for us on her CD is a 10-minute improvisation of *Sea Breeze*, where you play the melody at the beginning and the end, improvising in the middle. The orchestra teachers took turns improvising, signaling that they were done with a look towards their neighbor.

After each step in the workshop, the string educators were asked what it felt like. Answers were:

"Like I'm learning how to play my instrument for the first time."

"I'm glad there are only two measures to improvise."

"Can I use more than two or three notes?"

"I'm hearing notes in my head, but can't get them to happen on my instrument yet."

"This is scary!"

"How can I teach this to my students if I can't demonstrate the improvisation?"

This is how your orchestra students might feel as well. *Improvise!* can be used as a ten-minute warm up for orchestra class or in the private lesson studio. The teacher can learn along with the student. Younger students will not be inhibited. The idea is that if we start learning to read and play by ear from the beginning, we will be fearless and capable for all musical situations later in life.

*Cristina Seaborn holds a Bachelor of Music in jazz violin performance from Berklee College of Music, Boston and a Masters in Conducting from Saint Cloud State University. Contact her at <http://seabornstrings.com/> for information on Mel Bay's DVD Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle, her CDs Inside the Heart of a Musician, Seaborn Breeze, Spirit Wind, and her string orchestra arrangements. †*