



FIDDLE

Improvising from the Beginning

Jazz String Curriculum for 4th, 5th and 6th Grade String Orchestra

Part 1 Sound and Silence

by Cristina Seaborn

Learn how to improvise from the ground up, and build a strong foundation of rhythm, melody, harmony and form. In a series of articles on basic instruction you can give to your 5th and 6th grade beginning orchestra students, we will be learning how to play accompaniment parts while half the group practices improvisation all at once. This will be a safe place for you and your students to experiment for the first time with spontaneous composition. You will be able to model this for your students, one step at a time. This table of contents lists the series of lesson plans that will come out, one topic in each String Notes magazine article:

- Sound and Silence
- Melody and Chord Progression
- Long and Short Melodies
- Rhythm
- Groove
- Ornamentation of Melody and Rhythm
- Melody Notes outside of the Chord
- Preparing for Harmonic Change
- Chord Tones
- Guide Tone Lines
- Ornamentation of Guide Tone Lines
- Harmonic Progression

Sound and Silence—Play and Rest

When you have *Silence* after you create *Sound*, you give yourself time to reflect. Did you like what you just created? Do you want to repeat it? Do you want to go a different direction? Pause and give yourself time to hear what you are creating. One of the biggest mistakes a beginning improviser does is play on and on without a rest. The balance between *Sound* and *Silence* does not need to be equal. Use your musical taste to create the balance. Control the use of *Sound* and *Silence* in your solo so that your musical taste is obvious.

Create a solo using only one note. Play for one measure and rest for one measure. Focus on the idea of a balance of *Sound* and *Silence*. Use the following chords:

- Use one chord only (D chord)
- Use a two chord pattern (D chord, G chord)
- Use familiar blues progression (blues in D)
- No chords and Sound Effects

Use one chord only (D chord)

Vn/Va
Vc 8db

Bass

Teach students by rote the accompaniment above on open strings. The easy and advanced versions work together; I like to give students the choice. Soloist needs to be heard above the rest of the group. It is best to play the accompaniment pizzicato so that the soloist is heard using the bow.

The soloist can pizzicato or use the bow. Soloist starts with one note of your choice in the D scale. In a class, the soloist can nod to the next soloist after a few turns. Play for one measure, and rest for one measure. The resting gives you time to reflect on what

you played. Start easy with just one note. Focus on rhythm. As a challenge, play a different rhythm every time for three minutes!!! As soon as you accidentally add a second note, start using 2 notes, then 3, and so on. Try playing for two measures and resting for two, or playing for three measures and resting for one.

The reason why this is such a great first lesson is that improvisers focus more on the rhythm. It's too overwhelming to start by focusing on the chord progressions. This rhythmic focus is like learning to hold a bow correctly before you play on the string. It helps you to lay the rhythmic foundation on which you can build a melody.

Use a two chord pattern (D chord, G chord)

Vn/Va
Vc 8db

Bass
(slap on the rests)

Vn/Va
Vc 8db

Bass
(play/slap)

Teach students by rote the accompaniment above. As before, the easy and advanced versions work together, and the soloist needs to be heard above the rest of the group. For the advanced version of the accompaniment, work on producing a good rhythmic consistency from the group before the soloist starts.

Soloist again starts with one note of your choice in the D scale; play for 1 measure, rest for 1 measure. Then play two notes of the D scale for 2 measures, rest for 2 measures. Play three notes of the D scale for 3 measures, rest for 1 measure. Play a different rhythm every time for three minutes!!!

When you are doing this in an orchestra classroom, have one side of the room play the accompaniment, and the other side improvise. Switch every 3 minutes. When students are playing for one measure and resting for one measure, improvising as a group makes it safe to experiment.

Play for three measures and rest for 2 measures. Now your improvisation is starting in a different place within the 4-measure phrase. Your ideas will be stimulated because of the new starting places.

Start your improvisation on some place besides the downbeat for advancing your rhythmic ideas.

Use familiar blues progression (Blues in D)

Teach students the above accompaniment by rote before reading the music. This is a familiar tune progression, the 12-bar blues. As before, the soloist needs to be heard above the rest of the group. The soloist can pizzicato or use the bow.

Soloist again starts with one note of your choice in the D scale; play for 1 measure, rest for 1 measure. Then play two notes of the D scale for 2 measures, rest for 2 measures. Play three notes of the D scale for 3 measures, rest for 1 measure. Play a different rhythm every time for three minutes!!!

Advanced Blues

The 12 bar blues progression in the key of D is: DDDD | GGDD |

AGDA |. It is good to learn the blues progression in this way also: 1111 | 4411 | 5415 |. Now you can change the blues progression into any key. Use the number 1 for the key you are in. Give a number to every note in the scale:

D E F# G A B C# D

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

A chord is made of every other note. A chord has to have at least three notes. You can build a chord on every note of the scale. The D chord has notes D, F#, A. The G chord has notes G, B, D. The A chord has notes A, C#, E.

Learn the advanced 12-bar blues chord progression (below) from the sheet music. If the accompaniment is too loud because the players must use the bow, the soloist will need to be amplified.

Change the group that is doing the accompaniment each time through the 12 bar blues progression. Improvisers or soloists play for two measures and rest for two measures.

In advance, let the group know half the room will improvise while half plays the chord progression, for three minutes. Near the end of the 3 minutes, there will be 4 soloists (e.g. front row), then two soloists, and finally one soloist. Each time, the accompaniment should get quieter to be able to hear the solos. Pre-select the 4 improvisers, 2 improvisers and final soloist.

You may find that it is really hard to rest. You can choose to rest for two measures first, so that you are playing in measures 3 and 4 in a different part of the harmonic progression. Or, for interest, play in measures 2 and 3, rest in measures 4 and 5, play in 6 and 7, and rest in measures 8 and 1. Your improvising will change because of the interesting place you choose to play in the harmonic progression.

No chords and Sound Effects

For fun, at the end of your practice session, try improvising with no chords. You are free to make sound effects, slides, percussive use of the string instrument, bow chops, tremolo, double stops, pizzicato, trill, lots of string crossings, four finger chords, and trying to sound like a bird, etc. Do a contest between two players where each one gets to play for four measures.

In our next article we will look at Song Melody. Stay tuned!

Cristina Seaborn has produced an instructional video for fiddling Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle (Mel Bay), CDs entitled Inside the Heart of a Musician, Seaborn Breeze, and Spirit Wind, and many arrangements for string orchestra of fiddle music, jazz, Celtic, Cajun, and original. †