

# IMPROVISATION

by Benjamin Whitcomb

Improvisation has played an enormous role in virtually every form of music that has ever existed, so it is critical that our string students obtain some basic level of understanding and fluency with the idea. There are other reasons why it is important to study improvisation as well:

- 1) It helps students learn to think like a composer, which in turn helps them understand how music works and how better to perform it.
- 2) It helps to “loosen up” their playing. Playing more freely and “getting into the music” are very important ingredients in a good performance, and they are far easier to under-do than to overdo. How many people who claim not to like classical music would actually enjoy it if it were played with all the verve, vigor, and general enthusiasm of a rock star or a jazz musician?

Have a student who dreads the idea of improvising? Don't worry! It is very likely that they will either like or love improvising once they get the hang of it. Be patient and persistent, for it often takes classically trained musicians a while to get used to improvisation.

There are many different types of improvisation, but what you need to know about improvisation can be divided into two categories:

- 1) Classical improvisation, which involves such things as ornamenting baroque pieces and creating your own cadenzas.
- 2) Non-classical, or “alternative styles” improvisation, the most common and influential form of which is jazz improvisation.

## Jazz Improvisation: A Primer

Fortunately, we live in an age when there are many very good books on beginning jazz improvisation, some of which specifically address the string instruments. Most of these also contain CDs that students can play along with. Below is a list of some

of my own recommendations to students about how to get started improvising in the jazz style.

- 1) *Listen* to a lot of great jazz musicians, whether live or recorded. Listening carefully and critically to relevant music is an indispensable aspect of learning any musical style. Be sure to listen to some great jazz string players as well. Pay attention to the left- and right-hand techniques in the jazz style, which are quite different from their use in the classical style and which take some getting used to.
- 2) Listen to the distinctive figurations and the highly syncopated rhythms that are characteristic of jazz improvisation. Practice these rhythms and figurations while working on your scales.
- 3) Improvise solos of your own *on one pitch only*. This is very important because, in jazz, the rhythmic element is more important than the pitches, and because what often overwhelms our brain is having *too many choices* in too many parameters. As you grow more comfortable, gradually add additional pitches to your palette of choices.
- 4) When you are ready to use the other pitches as well, you should start by simply picking a scale (such as a Dorian, minor, or pentatonic scale on D) and then experimenting with playing the notes in different orders. For not much money you can get a CD (usually billed as a tuning CD) that plays very long, sustained pitches (sometimes with the fifth added) of your choosing. Have the CD play a pedal D while you improvise in a D scale. After a while, experiment with adding the notes that aren't in the scale you are focusing on, so you can try different ways of resolving these pitches. Do not concern yourself with rhythm now, so that your brain's attention can be entirely on the pitches.
- 5) Next, you are ready to start combining

rhythms and pitches over chord progressions. Only improvise using simple chord progressions at first, such as those that only use two or three different chords. I recommend starting with the blues progression:

I I I I  
IV IV I I  
V IV I I

- 6) Try *singing* your own, original solos, and then playing what you just sang.
- 7) Learn your chords well. As a string player, a great way to learn your “jazz theory” is to practice walking bass lines. There are several good books for bassists on the topic of walking a bass line. If you are a violinist or violist, you will have to read bass clef and transpose the notes to your register, but that is good for you too. These books will also explain what each of the various chord symbols means, or you could look up this same information very easily on the Internet. To begin with, though, you could simply experiment with different ways of arpeggiating each of the chords, frequently favoring stepwise motion.
- 8) Students who are interested in pursuing jazz improvisation seriously and on a long-term basis should *transcribe* jazz solos as well. Transcription is also excellent ear training, and everyone can benefit from better-trained ears.

Students who get this far and want to go further should look for a professional string improviser from whom to take lessons. Most students may not make it through all of the above list of activities, but the further they do go, the more positive impact it will have on their maturity as a well-rounded musician.

*Benjamin Whitcomb is a Professor of Cello and Music Theory at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where he has received awards for his teaching, research and service. His book, The Advancing Cellist's Handbook, has received rave reviews. †*