



FIDDLE

Improvising from the Beginning Jazz String Curriculum for 4th, 5th and 6th Grade String Orchestra

Part 5: Groove

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 4th, 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

Groove is the background pulse of the music. All music has a groove, including classical, jazz, Celtic, folk, and rock. Groove is the sense of forward motion, the carrying pulse. This is different from the steady beat because the rhythm can be something other than all quarter notes.

Like the chain and sprocket on a bicycle, you can be in the groove, in sync, or you can lose your groove and cause a wreck! Groove is that important.

In Latin music, the groove can be two dotted quarter notes, followed by a quarter note. Mozart's *Symphony #40* has continual 8th note groove underlying a flowing melody. In bluegrass and fiddle music, there is a strong offbeat played by the mandolin and banjo, while the bass is slightly ahead of the beat to create excitement.

In jazz, one groove is a walking bass line of steady quarter notes, with accents on beats two and four. The soloist plays swing eighth notes, while the piano contrasts short, punchy chord accompaniments with sustained whole note chords.

A slow rock blues groove has a triplet feel for every beat, so $\frac{3}{4}$ time can be thought of as $\frac{12}{8}$. The bass and drum parts are a continuous quarter note and eighth note rhythm. The piano accompanist can be very sparse, with occasional triplets because the drum/bass can carry the groove throughout.

I have a fifth grade student who has

started improvising this year. His rhythm is strong and he plays with conviction, even though his playing ability is not advanced. It does not matter how fancy your technique is as long as you are in the groove, which means accurate rhythm. You can have great ideas, develop a melodic sequence, create variations from a theme, but all this matters little without groove. What connects with an audience is what connects with musicians. You have to be listening to the same underlying groove.

There is a time to play with the groove and a time to be free, but you have to do this with intention. Wait until you are solid with time before you play with time. Develop your listening skills so that you know what the other musicians are doing, and how your part fits into the music.

What do you think is the best way to play with another musician? Have you ever had students playing a duet and they are on different beats? What should a musician do when this happens? I let the students answer these questions. Today, two girls decided to listen to each other and make the adjustments when needed. The result was the duet sounded more together. Who is in control of the music when the beat gets off—the person playing the melody or the accompaniment? In the case of a classical duet, it might be the melody. In the case of an orchestra or band, it would be the

accompaniment.

Once you are solid in your groove, you feel connected to the music and can be free to think more about creativity in your solos. What you want is to have your musical mind connect to your instrument without any barrier. It is really cool when your ideas come out naturally with flow. This takes time to develop, but it will come.

One of my favorite ways to teach groove is with playing one note. In jazz, solos are played with swing eighth notes. The swing 8th note is long short long short, even though the 8th notes are written as even 8^{ths}.

- 1) Play one note and swing it using 8th notes. The accompaniment is a walking bass line for a 12 bar blues in G.
- 2) Play a G scale with an F natural in it. Play each note of the scale four times or for two beats using swing 8th notes. (GGGG, AAAA, BBBB, etc.)
- 3) Play two swing 8th notes (1 beat) on each note of the scale. You can choose to do one or two octave G scales depending on your students' ability. (GG, AA, BB, etc.)
- 4) Play the entire scale in swing 8th notes with one of each note up and down the scale. (GABCDEFG)
- 5) Play the walking bass line in swing 8th notes (see music example). Start with the same sequence of four times

on each note, then two, then one (same as steps 2–4).

- 6) Make up your own melody using notes of the G scale (with an F natural).
- 7) Remember to put some rests in your solo! Rests give you a chance to reflect on what you just said musically, and think about your next statement.
- 8) Try some string crossings with a repeated interval of a 4th. Notice how the same notes sound on the different chords.
- 9) Vary the accents, sometimes on the down bow and down-beat, sometimes on the up bow and up beat. Then combine phrases with both kinds of accents.
- 10) Vary the note value. You can use swing 8th notes, quarter notes, half notes, whole notes.
- 11) Vary the phrase length. Try some short, choppy phrases with a rest. Then have some long, fluid phrases.
- 12) Add syncopation by playing on the off beats.

Think of groove as the foundation for the music and make it a priority in your practicing. I think of it as the cake, and the melody as the frosting on the cake.



Have some fun with this!

Expert at fiddling and jazz improv, Cristina Seaborn has produced an instructional video Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle through Mel Bay, and many arrangements for string orchestra of fiddle, jazz, Celtic and original. †

Seaborn Groove Exercises

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