



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## Developing a Chord Tone Improvisation Method Based on Fiddle Tunes and Renaissance Dance Tunes for Beginning and Intermediate String Players

by Ginna Watson

### Introduction

Beginning and intermediate string students are often neglected when it comes to teaching improvisation. String studio teachers often think of developing their students' technical mastery, note-reading and accuracy of rhythm when considering how they can best help them become better musicians. But instead of concentrating solely on these problem-solving skills, they would do well to note the top priorities for student development in the arts recently listed by The National Association for Music Education: creativity and innovation (Buonviri, 2013). School music educators have long looked to NAFME's National Standards for providing them with curricular content, and the third National Standard advocates "improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments" (<http://www.nafme.org/>). String studio teachers can adopt this standard for use with their private students as well. However, although improvisation has been part of music-making throughout history, it's often neglected by music teachers. In fact, improvisation ranked near the bottom of the curricula in a 2007 survey of elementary general music teachers done by Whitcomb. Why? Teachers' reasons included a lack of class instruction time (60%), lack of experience with improvising (53%), and lack of training to teach improvisation (42%). The lack of improvisational instruction leads to music students who aren't exposed to it and, consequently, become afraid of it. As a result, string students often express anxiety when asked to improvise without adequate instruction, and their efforts are characterized by a lack of confidence. These problems are exacerbated by a scarcity of appropriate methods for learning how to improvise, and a failure to address the psychological factors involved. When improvising, then, students not only have to face the unfamiliar task of creating musical material live before an audience, but they also must confront performance anxiety, among other associated

problems. Resolving these issues requires the creation of an improvisation method that effectively teaches technical, musical, and generative skills, as well as psychological and behavioral responses for allaying fear and building confidence.

A number of strategies and techniques exist for teaching improvisation to string players, but creating a comprehensive curriculum requires a sequential approach that can be easily grasped by beginning and intermediate students. Most improvisation methods focus on teaching jazz improvisation to band students, and require a level of playing ability and harmonic vocabulary that is well beyond the scope of string students who come from a background of classical and folk music. Applying such an approach to beginning string teaching is problematic, however, because the very concept of playing non-notated music is foreign to most young string players, who have little or no training in how to create melodies based on underlying harmonies. Because string students do not have discrete keys on their instruments as wind, brass and keyboard players do, improvising across the fingerboard is even more difficult for them. In addition, the technical demands of learning how to produce a good bow tone and accurate left-hand intonation also take up much of the string students' early training, leaving teachers with little time and motivation to teach improvisation. Clearly, there is a need for a basic curriculum that allows students to concentrate on developing improvising skills without having to worry about technical demands.

A chord-tone method for teaching improvisation to beginning and intermediate violin students can address this need. Beginning with the most basic steps, this method can gradually progress to more advanced levels as students gain experience, while still allowing beginning students to participate. This curriculum can be used in a private studio setting with both individu-

als and groups, and can easily be expanded for use by violists, cellists and bass players in a string orchestra by transposing tunes into appropriate clefs and key areas. The method uses harmonically-based chord tone improvisation to teach students how to create melodies from arpeggios by giving them a specific, limited note set to choose from; at the same time, it allows them almost endless possibilities of chord tone combinations. This approach to improvisation teaches students that melodies are connected to the underlying harmonies of a song. Too often, string players—and violinists in particular—simply play melodic lines without realizing how they're connected to the underlying harmony; as a result, their parts lack connection to the accompaniments. By learning about chord tones and using them to create melodic variations, students can discover this connection and become better chamber players and more expressive musicians in addition to developing improvisation skills.

Fiddle tunes and renaissance dance tunes work well as the repertoire for a chord-tone improvisation method. With their short, symmetrical melodies, open strings, repeated rhythmic patterns and simple harmonies, they are a good genre for teaching beginning improvisation. In addition, fiddle music and renaissance dance tunes work well both with students who can read printed notation and with those who can play simple tunes by ear. Beginning with a familiar tune such as *Boil Them Cabbage* can help students feel comfortable with learning to improvise; after that they can move on to a simple renaissance tune such as the *Horse's Brawl*, a sixteenth-century French dance.

To allow students to focus on creating melodies, the method provides them with the five basic *Twinkle* rhythm patterns used in the Suzuki violin method to add to their chord-tone improvisations. They can combine patterns to create more variety as they develop their skill. By teaching students how to create

simple melodies based on chord tones and repeated rhythmic patterns in a step-by-step sequential method, this approach can provide a comprehensive, confidence-building approach to improvisation for beginning and intermediate violin students.

### Eight-Step Method

To begin, students can be taught that improvisation is defined as creating melodies, variations and accompaniments based on pre-existing tunes, and that in improvising they are using the structure and harmony of a given tune to make up a new but related melody. They will also learn that harmony can be defined as chords accompanying the notes of a melody, and that chords are made up primarily of triads, or stacks of thirds. Students can create a melody using any or all of the notes of the chords in the harmonic progression of the form, along with a rhythmic pattern.

Students can then be introduced to the genres of fiddle tunes and renaissance dances, explaining that renaissance dances like the *Horse's Brawl* are the ancestors of traditional Irish and American fiddle tunes like *Boil Them Cabbage*. Following this introduction, students should learn the melodies of the tunes—ideally both by ear and with written notation. Discussing learning strategies such as identifying where the form is the same and where it differs, noting similar and contrasting melodic contours and patterns, can help them. After students have learned the tunes, they can take turns accompanying each other on open strings as indicated by the chord symbols included above the notes. Beginning students can continue to play open strings as more advanced students practice improvising.

The following steps, in sequential order, can be used to teach students to improvise on the tunes:

1. Playing the stop pony, stop pony rhythm pattern on the open string accompaniment
2. Playing the root notes of the written chord chart using the stop pony, stop pony rhythm
3. Playing the three-note arpeggio patterns from bottom to top in the chord chart using the stop pony, stop pony rhythm
4. Playing the three-note arpeggio patterns from top to bottom in the chord chart using the stop pony, stop pony rhythm

5. Creating a melody from the three-note arpeggio patterns using the stop pony, stop pony rhythm
6. Playing any of the above steps using a different *Twinkle* rhythm
7. Playing the stop pony, stop pony rhythm in the A section of the tune and a different *Twinkle* rhythm in the B section
8. Adding connecting scale tones to the improvised melody using either or both rhythmic patterns

### Teaching and Learning Strategies

Strategies to help students learn and feel comfortable with these steps can include:

1. Reviewing all the Suzuki rhythms used in the *Twinkle* variations to remind students of the concept of adding rhythm patterns to a tune.
  2. Playing a dice game to determine
3. Teaching students how to read chord symbols and creating a bingo game where students circle chords found in *Boil Them Cabbage* and *Horse's Brawl*.
  4. Listening to a recording of a familiar pop song, following along with the sheet music and discussing how a guitarist would play the chord symbols to harmonize the melody.
  5. Playing all the bottom notes, middle notes, and top notes of the chord chart in turn with the stop pony, stop pony rhythm pattern and at least one other *Twinkle* rhythm pattern.
  6. Playing all three notes of the chord chart from top to bottom and bottom to top and discussing what constitutes an arpeggio.
  7. Demonstrating how to create an

which rhythm patterns to play with a familiar tune such as *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

## Boil Them Cabbage

trad. fiddle tune

Melody and chords

Chord-tone accompaniment with "stop pony, stop pony" rhythm

Chord-tone improvisation with "stop pony, stop pony" rhythm

### Boil Them Cabbage Chord Chart

|    |    |   |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |   |   |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|----|----|----|----|
| A  | A  | D | D | A  | A  | E  | E  | A  | A  | D | D | A  | E  | A  | A  |
| F# | F# | B | B | F# | F# | C# | C# | F# | F# | B | B | F# | C# | F# | F# |
| D  | D  | G | G | D  | D  | A  | A  | D  | D  | G | G | D  | A  | D  | D  |

- improvised melody from a combination of the notes in the chord chart.
- Asking students to practice creating their own melodies, playing them together and individually.
  - Filling out a worksheet version of the chord chart with students, circling notes to create five versions of an improvised melody.
  - Voting together on which improvisations sound most and least like the original melodies.

At each lesson or rehearsal, teachers can ask the students if they feel comfortable

with the step (or steps) listed above. If not, they can back up a step or two, keeping track of the steps they can play (as well as their comfort level) by using a checklist. Younger students will learn only the first few steps; intermediate students may not make it all the way through the ten steps either. The goal of the method is not to complete all the steps, but rather to use them in a sequential manner in teaching the students to improvise at their level of playing ability and feel comfortable doing so. In the weeks leading up to the performance, teachers can ask each student to remain at whichever step they feel most comfortable to practice

improvising.

### Performance and Assessments

During the performance, students can play their individual improvisation along with the rest of the group to help them feel more comfortable; as a result, there will be multiple notes played at once. This could be initially confusing to students, so teachers can help them get used to the sound by playing their own improvisations along with the students during their lessons. Assessments for this project can include observations, interviews, playing tests and reflections. Teachers can ask if there were steps in the

## Horse's Brawl

Arbeau (1588)

### Melody and chords

### Simple chord-tone accompaniment with "stop pony, stop pony" rhythm

### Chord-tone improvisation with "stop pony, stop pony" and "ice cream (shh) cone" rhythms

### Horse's Brawl Chord Chart

|    |    |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |   |    |    |    |   |   |
|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|---|---|
| D  | D  | G | A  | D  | A  | G  | A  | D  | D  | G | A  | D  | A  | D | D |
| B  | B  | E | F# | B  | F# | E  | F# | B  | B  | E | F# | B  | F# | B | B |
| G  | G  | C | D  | G  | D  | C  | D  | G  | G  | C | D  | G  | D  | G | G |
| A  | A  | D | D  | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | A  | D | D  | A  | A  | D | D |
| F# | F# | B | B  | F# | F# | F# | F# | F# | F# | B | B  | F# | F# | B | B |
| D  | D  | G | G  | D  | D  | D  | D  | D  | D  | G | G  | D  | D  | G | G |

learning process they felt worked better for them than others. Did they think the steps were too difficult? Did they prefer learning a single rhythm first and adding different notes to it, or would they have preferred to change the rhythm pattern first? Did they understand the concept of using a written chord chart, or would it have been easier to learn chord tones and arpeggio patterns by ear? Students should also be encouraged to provide feedback on their level of comfort and enjoyment. Did they feel more comfortable improvising by the end of the semester? Did this project help them feel they could “noodle” or jam on their instrument, and would they like to do more improvising?

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*Ginna Watson is a Twin Cities string player who specializes in period-instrument performance. She plays baroque violin and viola, medieval vielle and rebec, and medieval harp with the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, the Bach Society, and The Rose Ensemble for Early Music. Ginna teaches violin at Hamline University in St. Paul and violin and viola privately. She also gives masterclasses on medieval and baroque performance practice in the Twin Cities and throughout the country. ♪*