

All-State: You are What You Hear—Strategies for Developing Audiation, Rhythmic and Improvisational Skills

presented by Dr. Samuel Tsugawa — reported by Michael Sloane

Ed Gordon is regarded for his teaching, research and lecturing, and one of the theories he brought forward was the Expectancy Theory—that there is some sort of emotional response to music when you expect something to happen and it doesn't or is delayed. This theory is based on the Gestalt idea of the sum of the parts makes up the whole. Whole, part, whole. For example, one can see this put to use in the Suzuki teaching method for string instruments like the violin. The *Twinkle Variations* are experienced holistically with the familiar melody of *Twinkle, Twinkle*, and the rhythmic patterns are studied and its variations are taught, and then the whole tune is experienced completely with a deeper understanding of the patterns and tonality.

Teaching students to understand the emotional impact of a performance helps them to recognize expectancy. This theory, if true, attaches meaning to sound and allows real time anticipation of time, rhythm, melody and harmony. It may help create a library of sound through our eyes and ears.

An example is the video of singer Bobby McFerrin demonstrating the power of the pentatonic scale. A musically untrained audience showed that they can accurately sing a corresponding pitch that Mr. McFerrin signals, and recall these pitches on notice. More importantly, the audience can predict and reproduce the next pitch. I suppose this gives some evidence to Gordon's theory, that at some point in the audience's past, they developed a "library of sounds" and were able to recall those ordered sounds when prompted.

For a more detailed explanation of Ed Gordon's teachings, Dr. Wendy Valerio from the Alliance for Active Music Making www.allianceamm.org/resources/gordon/ has an excellent article expounding of the doctrines of Mr. Gordon.

Our session then moved to assessments and how do we know if students attach a meaning to sound? The Gordon method uses Solfege with a moveable Do, and this

is very helpful for checking if students will be able to define major or minor tonality, or at the upper level grades, identifying tonic/dominant triads and checking for intervallic patterns in melodies. Some examples of formative assessments are having the students sing, play, use hands, or hold up fingers to indicate answers.

Which is the best counting system? We looked at various counting systems like Kodaly, Gordon and traditional. However it was suggested that we focus on sounds rather than mechanical operations. What does a quarter rest feel like? Perhaps like a "sniff." What does an eighth rest feel like? Perhaps a shorter "sniff."

Finally, there was some very practical advice for implementing improvisation in the class. He said to make it a "low stress environment;" to make it easy for the students to create by not singling them out and made to play alone. The class should also be progressive on the choice of notes, and not be given too many notes to choose from in the beginning. It would be "like teaching a child how to swim." We would not teach the butterfly stroke first, for example. Make improvisation accessible to students by creating a low stress classroom.

Having studied jazz with Ellis Marsalis and other fantastic teachers in the Philadelphia area, improvisation was a large part of my music study, and was comfortable for me, however I still seek improvement and refinement. For many years, I could not understand why very fine musicians had difficulty with improvisation or just never tried it. Perhaps, it does leave one somewhat vulnerable and exposed to a critical listener, or if they have difficulty executing it, they may feel defeated and not confident. So it's just easier not to practice it or ignore it.

Why is it beneficial to teach improvisation? It teaches creativity, listening skills, intonation recognition, improves memory skills and it's fun—really there are not a lot of rules. My teacher once said, "If it sounds good, it is good." It also fulfills one of the music standards of improvising melodies,

variations and accompaniments.

How can it be introduced in a low stress environment and have students be excited as Dr. Tsugawa suggested? Have everyone do it together over a drone. Give them the choice of pitches and a few rhythmic patterns. Then have only certain sections of the orchestra improvise. Another idea was to have the whole class use a riff that's repeated over a looping drum pattern. Once they are comfortable with it, to try changing a note or rhythm, then to maybe flip the pattern "upside down." A third idea is to use a call and response with the students, again keeping the stress low by having everyone participate. As students become comfortable, smaller groups can play together, and finally perhaps individuals can show their skills. Additionally, a teacher could have students prepare their improvising at home and record for the teacher to assess, reducing the risk of exposure to classmates. I think one thing that must be addressed, is that the teacher needs to help the student realize that it is acceptable to make mistakes, that they will happen and that it is not a bad thing; perhaps even encouraging mistakes as part of the learning process.

There were some apps discussed that would be useful for teaching improvisation. One that was mentioned is called iReal pro. This app lets the teacher use common jazz chord charts in the key of your choice. The user may select the complete rhythm section (bass, piano, drums), or may select just the bass and drums. The user may also use montunos (Latin ostinatos) that stay on one chord, as a background for improvisation. This app is super helpful because of the ability to choose the key, tempo and instruments, all while displaying the chord chart. Garage Band was mentioned because of all of the "loop" patterns it has housed within the app, and the fact that student issued iPads come with it already installed.

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