

All-State: Improvisation

presented by Greg Byers — reported by Kristen Moon

Improvisation #1

Improvisation is composing in the moment. Improvisation requires both inner hearing and technical skill to create. Improvisation can be intimidating because there are so many possibilities and also because we fear failure. Byers outlined methods for introducing improvisation in small steps, to help students feel successful and willing to take the next step and risk. Byers outlined a multitude of activities to introduce improvisation:

Call and response

Byers uses a backing track to set a groove and style. This opens up opportunities to teach different styles. The teacher can start with one note, and then build up to sets of pitches as students advance. Extended techniques can also be used here, such as tremolo, glissando, etc.

Group question and answer

The leader plays a line and the whole group responds with their own answer.

Musical telephone.

One person performs a musical phrase, and then the next plays back and continue through the group.

“Conducted Improvisation”

The conductor holds up cue cards, gestures, and performers respond.

Question and individual answer

Leader plays a question, and individual responds.

Adding Improvisation to existing material

Look for opportunities to improvise within a familiar structure. Byers recommends identifying the form, chord changes, foreground/background and then selecting an appropriate section to add improvisation. Variations are also a means of improvising.

Improvisation #2 How to Elevate Your Knowledge and Ease of Improvisation to the Next Level

Byers pointed out that if the teacher is not comfortable with impro-

visation, the students will not be comfortable with it. Improvisation is a link to ear training, and enhances technical skill. Byers demonstrated methods for how improvisation can be practiced, arguing that it can and should be practiced. Practicing improv, like anything else, helps it become more automatic. Byers made the point that a lot of “input” is necessary to extend improv skill. Listening, studying theory, learning scales and chords all enhance improvisational skill. A developing improviser can generate musical ideas and then has the skill to bring those ideas to life on their instrument. Practicing scales and arpeggios helps develop the technical skill needed to automatically produce on the instrument an idea that initially occurred in one’s head. Some suggested exercises include: transcribing directly to the instrument (not writing down the transcription), reharmonizing a favorite tune, and creating variations on a melody. Arpeggiating within the harmonic rhythm is one example of how to do this. Composing a new melody is also a method of improvisation. Byers suggested several apps and resources to take improvisation skills to the next level:

- Real Pro - Chord Charts and Backing Tracks App
- Time Guru - Metronome App
- *Patterns for Jazz* - Jerry Coker
- *A Chromatic Approach to Jazz Harmony and Melody* - David Liebman
- *Effortless Mastery* - Kenny Werner
- *The Strum Bowing Method: How to Groove on Strings* - Tracy Silverman
- *Arpeggios for Jazz Violin, Cello, and Viola* - Christian Howes

Singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer Greg Byers was the first jazz/classical cellist/bassist to graduate from the University of Miami. His pioneering musical style focuses on modern styles, improvisation, and integrating technology. Greg has performed and recorded with diverse artists such as Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Raquel Sofia, Kat Perkins, VocalEssence, Dr. John, Steve Miller, Omar Rodríguez-López and Davina and the Vagabonds.

Kristen Moon teaches orchestra at Hastings High School. Our live All-State Workshops include interactive playing experiences like this one. †