

CLINIC: DEMYSTIFYING IMPROVISATION

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Ahead of our presentation at the 2023 ASTA National Conference, we were delighted to present our workshop, *Demystifying Improvisation: Encouraging Unique Musical Voices with Intentional Practice of Improvisation*, to members of MNSOTA at the fall meeting. The three main objectives are to:

1. Recognize that improvisation is something that can and should be practiced by both teachers and students.
2. Break improvisation down into three manageable steps that are simple to both practice and teach.
3. Provide two building blocks for accompanying or “comping” for students and/or peers as they hone their improv skills.

Simply put, improvisation is the art of making something up on the spot. Within the context of music, we have found that improvisation has become misunderstood and, as such, seemingly inaccessible to both teachers and students. It seems that improvisation is most often thought of as something people are either born doing, or not. And, if they were born doing it, they are graced with the highbrow, elite study of the art, which is reserved for only the greatest, best, and brightest. While that path may well be true for some, we believe that improvisation is for everyone, because at its core, it encourages the exploration of the individual’s unique musical voice. To be empowered by one’s own voice, and to be able to express that musically, is a great skill and gift that we believe should be taught, practiced, and honed from early on in a musical life.

A common barrier is that teachers, themselves, often hold the same misconceptions that the rest of the musical and non-musical world holds about improvisation being reserved for some, but not all. But we have found a way to break down these barriers so both teachers and students believe that improvisation is a skill just like any other they teach and learn, and equip them with the tools to practice it.

Establishing a key, time signature, and chord progression for accompaniment are the only true “rules” to this practice, with some suggested additional guidelines about which strings to utilize, shifting, etc. We include a basic 4-bar chord progression at

the bottom of our student handouts as a suggested chord progression for accompanying solos: D | G D | D | A D |

This progression could be played as half notes (one letter per bar equals 4 beats, two letters per bar equals 2 beats each), quarter notes, or a more groovy rhythmic jam; these suggested guidelines will be unique to each teacher and their students, depending on skill level.

Sample Chord Progression

D G D D A D

Melody

We begin with a melodic, quarter note solo. Taking rhythm out of the equation, we focus on experimenting with note choice.

To practice: Within the established key, students are encouraged to play a note on every beat, for 8 bars. If this is being taught in a group setting, we try “group solos” first, where everyone plays at a *mp* dynamic, but at the same time, to avoid embarrassment, hesitation, etc. While the solos are happening, the teacher accompanies, playing either whole notes or another rhythmic pattern to go along with the aforementioned chord progression. Repeat this step several times and give prompts before each iteration, e.g., “Try playing the first three notes of your scale first” or, “Start and end on a different note than before.”

Rhythm

Next, we work on one-note rhythmic solos. Taking notes out of the equation, we focus on experimenting with what our bows and instruments can do, rhythmically. Within this step, we discuss how rests can be impactful during a solo, giving the player and listener time to process and anticipate what might come next.

To practice: Within the established key, students are encouraged to play a single

note (tonic works well!), but with varying rhythm, for 8 bars. If this is being taught in a group setting, we try “group solos” first, where everyone plays at a *mp* dynamic, but at the same time, to avoid embarrassment, hesitation, etc. While the solos are happening, the teacher accompanies, playing either whole notes or another rhythmic pattern to go along with the aforementioned chord progression. Repeat this step several times and give prompts before each iteration, e.g. “Experiment with your rhythm starting slow, then getting faster” or, “Use rests to your advantage.”

Melody + Rhythm = Improvise!

Lastly, we put melody and rhythm together. Keep it simple! This is our main suggestion. We often say that this is the point in which students feel a need to play every note as fast as possible, and this upfront reminder to keep it simple helps students focus on what is possible rather than what they feel they should be doing.

To practice: Within the established key, students are encouraged to play a full solo for 8 bars without the restrictions of a single note or rhythmic parameters. Again, if this is being taught in a group setting, we try “group solos” first, where everyone plays at a *mp* dynamic, but at the same time, to avoid embarrassment, hesitation, etc. While the solos are happening, the teacher accompanies, playing either whole notes or another rhythmic pattern to go along with the aforementioned chord progression. Repeat this step several times and give prompts before each iteration, e.g., “Think of one thing you’d like to do differently next time” or reminders of keeping it simple, adding in rests, etc.

At this point, there are many different directions one could take. Depending on the variables like class time, student ability, and interest, teachers could work with students to more fully develop their solos and introduce soloing techniques for crafting intentional solos like range, dynamics, arcing, etc. However, we find that any additional time is well spent introducing students to comping techniques. String players are likely more familiar with the melodic capabilities of their instruments and may not yet know that they can play more than just a melody. We enjoy teaching techniques like chopping (a rhythmic

“scratch” that acts as a backbeat) and accented rhythmic patterns (groups of 8th or 16th notes with accents placed in strategic places) to show students how much fun it can be to hold down a “groove” or a bass line. The following is an example of an accented rhythmic pattern. “Ghost” on the non-accented notes; the bow is on the string, but not into the string:



Draw basic notes on the board and have

students create their own pattern by placing accents wherever they want:



Comping opens up a new world of possibilities for students and teachers when players can take on both a soloistic and accompaniment role.

Playful and unexpected, new-classical crossover duo The OK Factor writes and performs folk-inspired music influenced by multiple

genres and styles, with an artistry that reveals their classical training. Cellist Olivia Diercks and violinist Karla Colahan find great joy in defying expectations and delivering an experience outside of what audiences anticipate from a cello and violin combo. Their passion for performing and educational outreach has continued to bring them success in communities across the Midwest and abroad, inviting audiences to explore music and cultivate a curiosity about its role in their lives. †