



FIDDLE

Reflections from Eclectic Strings Day 2023

by Jeanette Ruff (violinist)

In *The Music Man* Professor Harold Hill explained his “Think System” for playing music. Of course, the character of Harold Hill was only a con artist in a Broadway musical, but there is a nugget of truth hidden in that entertaining plot. You can perform music without having ever seen the notes printed in front of you. All you need is knowledge of your instrument and the ability to hear the desired music in your head.

Eclectic Strings Day is an annual spring workshop on improvisation. Students and teachers can self-select the beginner/intermediate/advanced track; everyone gets 3 classes with different clinicians. The day culminates in a jam. The 2023 clinicians were Ernest Bisong (violin), Levi Comstock (viola) and Greg Byers (cello). This is a group of string teachers from different Minnesota school districts who desire to expand music ability beyond the printed page. Now, a person won’t learn to jam-like-a-pro after a three-hour workshop, just like you can’t learn to ride a bicycle by reading a book. The best way to learn is to do it. But a few tips and encouragement are extremely helpful.

First, let’s start by saying that we have all been raised surrounded by music, whether it was nursery songs, advertising jingles on TV and radio, movie themes, as well as the music our parents, and we, listened to as “our favorite song.” By the time we are teenagers we have a vast library of music already in our heads. We are unaware of much of what we actually know about rhythm, melody, harmony and chord progressions. We may know nothing of the theory, but we grew up hearing music, so our practical understanding is already there just waiting to be tapped. We only need the desire, and courage, to leverage that subliminal knowledge.

An essential to learning improvisation is finding a music community...because

the first step is to listen and experiment with finding one note, your note, within a tune. All you need to do is find a single frequency that sounds right to you within a given song. The good news is that within each key signature there are multiple notes that “work” for a given melody.

Now that you have found your note, try finding a rhythm, by bowing or plucking. Play intermittently—that is, rest every so often and pick your moments in the flow of the tune. It’s important to hear the overall arc of the music and insert your note where it fits. You need to build confidence in your ability to listen to music and find the missing notes, hear that note in your head and be able to produce that sound on your instrument.

If you miss that note, then perhaps you can step or slide into it. Who’s to say that’s not how glissando got invented, or for that matter grace notes or hammer-ons?

A note can be played sweetly with a longbow or maybe even a vibrato, or it can be bounced on the down beat. There is no one “right” way to play. You are adding your own experiences, your own personality to the piece.

How to be comfortable with improvisation, breathing, rhythm, and ghost bowing.

During Eclectic Strings Day 2023, students were taught a song by Journey, breaking it down into sections. Learning the melody; learning how to figure the key signature. Listen for progressions and see what I can play. You can play a wide variety of notes I call chord grazing.

Cristina Seaborn, one of the coordinators for Eclectic Strings Day, took pictures and videos in different places and of different instructors.

Allow in trust wherever the muse takes you. It takes a while to get into improv. The music you listen to is a library in your head.

Whenever you miss a note, you can slide into the right note. Doing a one note solo helps show that rhythm is more important than notes. When you do two notes, that opens up to more rhythms. When you use three notes even more rhythms will come to your mind.

Where is the phrase going to end? When dealing with vocalists, you can be a sweetener to a song, by playing a good vibrato note especially changing the register. A male singer is down low; your job as a soprano instrument is to go high. Figure out what my rhythm pattern is. Move up an octave. Do the math. A choir director said that there are different frequency ranges. Find where there is no sound and fill that spot.

You need to want to learn to improvise. You have an entire lifetime to explore improvisation. Cristina started at age 17, took an improv class with a friend who was a cellist. The instructor played the saxophone. At 15 minutes past the hour the rhythm section showed up. He called “blues in F.”

You may get lost when you first start with improvisation. Try using *Jazz Improvisation Made Easy* by John Blake and Jody Harmon, which is in key signatures that are easier for string players.

Jeanette Ruff, a native of Minneapolis, is a viola player who started getting into fiddling through the influence of her sister. After enjoying a brief stint in Albuquerque, NM and Portland, OR, she currently lives in St Cloud, MN. A history buff who is addicted to libraries, she is an enthusiastic volunteer for the Minnesota State Fiddle Association (MSFA). She recently bought a 5-string fiddle and is attempting to do both classical and fiddling on it. Jazz, Eclectic and Busking are all on the horizon! ♪