



# ORCHESTRA

## Improvisation Rules!

by Wes Myers

The subject of improvisation comes up frequently with many ideas for how it should be approached. However, there is still hesitation for most string teachers when it comes to introducing and including improvisation in their teaching. They may not be comfortable improvising themselves, or don't want to deal with the pushback from students who don't like the idea of improvisation. I love to improvise and have tried to pass that passion on to my students. While I was not always successful early on, I do have some basic "rules" I've developed over the years for teachers and students. Improvisation can be lots of fun when introduced carefully. Some students might even declare, "Improvisation Rules!"

### Student Rules for Improvisation

In my efforts to introduce things slowly, I always include my student "rules" for improvisation. These are really tips or guidelines more than they are hard and fast rules. However, I feel they are helpful for students because they give permission to explore which is what improvisation is at its most basic level. My improvisation rules for students are:

1. There are no mistakes
2. Set your own boundaries
2. If it sounds good keep it. If not? Throw it away.

Unlike the composed music that students play every day, improvisation has no right or wrong. When approached correctly, that can be very freeing for students. They have permission to play anything, to explore a variety of sounds, and not worry about technical accuracy. Not every student will immediately feel free to experiment though. They may need encouragement to branch out. I demonstrate a little improvisation that includes some wilder sounds. Including a slide or a tremolo may be the thing that shows a student they can take risks.

While you can encourage some very free improvisation with no boundaries, most

students want to make enjoyable sounds. That requires a framework to keep them within the boundaries of tonal music. Most jazz curriculum teaches students a scale or a series of scales for students to use as their framework. However, many students end up paralyzed by the number of options available to them. Not only do they need to pick notes from the scale, but they also need to add rhythm. Too many choices can leave students reeling. For that reason, I encourage students to set their own boundaries. Students can limit their choices even further to just a few notes or a strict set of rhythms. While that may sound restrictive, a small number of choices can actually be very freeing. I've observed a young child whose mother let him pick any candy in the isle. This caused a meltdown because he just couldn't pick. Likewise, students may need something as simple as a binary choice. This rhythm or that. This note or that. Once they are comfortable with trying, the range of options can be increased.

The last student rule for students is about trial and error. Students need multiple opportunities to improvise. A single day can be good for exposure to practice, but good improvisation requires some time. When you listen to great improvisors across their body of work you will notice that not every solo is unique. They have time-tested musical ideas that they lean on. If you listen to them a large amount you can even recognize the player just by listening. Our students need time to develop their own musical ideas that can be used and reused. When students are engaged in active improvisation, they should be listening to the ideas they play and making real time decisions. Did that sound good? Play it again! Memorize that idea and put it aside for later. Did that sound bad? Never play that set of notes again. Trial and error can help students build up a "bag of tricks" for their next improvisation and build their confidence for the future. Improvisation is a lot less scary when you have some ideas before you begin.

### Teacher Rules for Improvisation

Just like my student rules for improvisation, I have a set for teachers. These are things I like to adhere to when possible. Sometimes you can't follow these rules due to the groups that you teach or other outside factors so, once again, they are more like a set of tips to use. My teacher improvisation rules are:

1. Start them young
2. Realize that improvisation is scary
3. It doesn't have to be a bunch of jazz solos

There are a variety of reasons to have your beginners improvise. They tend to be more willing to try new things, they don't have a preconception of what orchestra is supposed to be, and they don't deal with the middle school worries.

When beginner students walk into the room, they might have an idea of how orchestra is supposed to work. Maybe their older sibling played viola and told them the basics. Even then, the beginners don't know what to expect and that can be a powerful tool. This can be a great time to start any expectations including singing or playing independently. If you try to add those things later, you should expect some pushback.

Middle school students, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades in particular, can make teaching improvisation very difficult. Improvisation is a very personal action. Students aren't simply trying to accurately play a composed line; they are trying to make something new. For many students that means all the blame lies with them when things sound bad. Middle school is a time where students are working out their personal identity. They want to be liked, they want to be correct, and they want to avoid ridicule at all costs. When someone improvises independently, they put themselves out there in a very vulnerable position. And how do they know when they've improvised correctly? That uncertainty is difficult for students. They

spend their whole day looking for and recreating correct answers, but improvisation has no right answers.

When you think of improvisation you likely jump straight to jazz. This is not inherently bad. Jazz is an incredible genre with a wealth of music to use as a vehicle for improvisation. However, we often jump to playing full jazz standards and overload students with multiple scales to play while navigating changing chord progressions. It's very complicated!

Improvisation can start much simpler. Students can pick a rhythm to play over open strings. Once they've learned the D major scale, you can have them pick a rhythm to play on each scale degree. The first improvisation activity I have students do barely qualifies as improvisation. I have them tell me their favorite food, like pepperoni pizza, and we all play the rhythm on an open string. It isn't making up a melody in the moment, but it still involves student choice. Working your way up to spontaneous melody in small amounts can be helpful.

Next, I like to build ear training by having a student lead the "echo songs." I start each beginner class with call and response. I use new notes as they are added but start with the open strings. A student can take on the role of leader but be sure to set a strict boundary. Starting with just open D works well. Most students enjoy being the leader and it gives me the opportunity to check their understanding of single measure rhythmic patterns. If their pattern is too long, we take time to review.

When you get to an opportunity to have students improvise in a longer format this smaller work should pay off in their willingness to try and the quality of their improvisation. I do like to use the *Jazz Philharmonic* book by Bob Phillips in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The *Groovin' for the First Time* tune is simple and the D Dorian scale works well for improvisation. I would still avoid having students solo unless they volunteer. I have all the students do a mass improvisation while I play the chord progression. There's an included play along track that works well.

I will never force a student to improvise a solo, but if you spend a few days on the music the list of willing soloists will grow.

I've taught improvisation for a long time. I don't spend a large amount of time on it, but I have found success following my rules for students and teachers. If you've never tried teaching improvisation, I would highly suggest giving it a try. Use my rules when possible for a smoother experience, but just like the improviser, don't be afraid of making a mistake. You'll learn over time and eventually have your own systems that work.

*Wes Myers is the 4<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade orchestra and High School Beginning Guitar teacher in Marshall, MN. In addition, he is the assistant director for marching band, jazz band, and directs the pit orchestra for the fall musical. He is also the principal bassist with the Southwest Minnesota Orchestra and a conductor of the Marshall Municipal City Band. †*