

HELPING STUDENTS MASTER IMPROVISATION

Bob Hinz introduces the concept of improvisation and suggests ways to develop improvisation skills in students.

BY BOB HINZ

Improvisation takes place when a musician's aural and technical facilities combine to create a spontaneous form of musical expression. Improvisation has its counterpart in verbal communication: the spontaneous revealing of oneself through conversation and the sharing of ideas and experiences with another person or persons.

The many facets of improvisation that are expressed by a musician are influenced by individual musical experiences and listening to other artists improvise. Many improvisers use a melodic or rhythmic scheme (such as a motive, a melodic figure or fragment, a lick, or a repeated pattern such as an ostinato) to establish a basic musical direction. They also use repetition, variation, contrast, and other forms of development to elaborate on their fundamental ideas. Jazz artists use the chord changes of popular songs to provide a harmonic framework for melodic improvisation and perform their improvisations and compositions in a variety of rhythmic styles. Other artists allow themselves complete spontaneity and improvise every aspect of their performances without any preparation or precondition. In

any case, improvisation is always given its lifeblood through spontaneity.

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Spontaneity

Improvisations differ from traditional notated musical forms because they introduce the element of spontaneity into not only the interpretive facets of the performance but also the music itself. Every facet of the music—dynamics, articulation, phrasing, harmony, rhythm, melody, and form—is directly under the control of the improviser. The mood of the moment may also have a bearing on the character of the performance—even the audience may affect the musical outcome. A performance of a notated composition, on the other

hand, involves the performer in trying to render an “ideal” expression of the work, regardless of the circumstances. Except for some minor adjustments (such as a change in pedaling to compensate for greater or lesser amounts of hall reverberation in a piano performance, for example), the piece is played as it was rehearsed.

Just as a performer is aware of the elements of a notated composition, the improviser is aware of scales, intervals, harmony, chord structures, and other musical elements. In the improviser's hands, however, these musical elements become malleable. Improvisers also relate to their instruments in fundamentally different ways than do performers who principally study and perform notated compositions. Improvisers are guided mainly by ear and the musical vocabulary of their style. Moreover, performers who are forced to rely on notation for every performance do not automatically acquire the necessary skills they need to improvise. Similarly, improvisers who are accustomed to playing by ear are often less successful at reading music. Specific musical skills become strengthened or weakened depending not only upon a musician's interest and desire (which are influenced by the individual's musical values and priorities), but also upon the artist's innate ability and success with a particular musical skill.

Objective vs. Subjective

Traditionally notated musical art forms may be thought of as differing from improvisation in that the approach musicians take toward their expression is more objective. While playing a notated work, the performer remains partially objective through his or her performance of the work to the degree of being somewhat detached from it. The performer in this instance concentrates mainly on acquiring a solid technique and on developing an understanding of and an appreciation for the element of interpretation. Even though the performer relies on his or her aural memory to aid in the memorization and performance of the piece, notational indications, psychomotor memory, and other facets of conceptual organization, such as musical structure and design, are more important components of a performance of a written composition than of an improvised piece.

The improviser, on the other hand, is telling a story that ties into the circumstances of the moment, rather than attempting to render a definitive interpretation of a work that is a “fixed object” and that, for the most part, remains unaltered from performance to performance. Improvisation is, accordingly, subjective. The improviser is often identified along with the improvisation, in much the same way as a composer is often identified by the style of a composition. In this respect, traditional classical music is said to be a “composer’s art,” while jazz, which has improvisation as its principal component, is described as a “performer’s art.” The performer of a notated work has no influence on the style and vocabulary of the piece, unlike the improviser, who directly influences a piece’s style and vocabulary.

Ornamenting a Tune

What is the improviser doing when he or she improvises? What constitutes an improvisation? Improvisation mainly involves the element of variation. The most common form of improvisation involves a variation of a composed melody or tune. Since melody is the most essential musical element of an improvised perfor-

mance, particularly within the context of a group performance, one of the first steps of the improvisation process (and one that even experienced improvisers often lose sight of) is to subtly change a melody through ornamentation (trills, turns, and so forth). In this manner, the improviser can grasp the spirit of an improvisation as a process of melodic variation rather than as the creation of an entirely new melody.



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Ornamentation allows the improviser to rely upon the essential element of the music (the melody), while also creating some rhythmic interest during the stagnant, or unchanging, moments of the original melody—during long notes or long harmonic rhythms, for example. Long notes could typically refer to whole, half, and even eighth notes during slow or moderate tempos. Ornamentation, in baroque music, for example, is a method by which performers give motion and rhythmic direction to a pause in the phrase or to longer notes that end a musical phrase, sentence, or period. Ornamentation also allows the improviser to create other kinds of melodic interest through the use of appoggiaturas and other ornaments.

By ornamenting the original melody, the improviser becomes familiar with some of the important elements of melodic improvisation: the use of rests and longer note values, phrasing, melodic development, and the use of range to create interest and expression. While the underlying harmony often determines the improvis-

er’s note choice, the horizontal quality of the musical line and other facets of melodic construction (such as scales, intervals, sequences, and ornaments) govern the improviser’s sense of melodic direction.

Elements of Improvisation

Different styles, rhythms, harmonic systems, and the improviser’s own musical philosophy determine the nature of the improvisation. The character of the piece being improvised also influences the approach the improviser uses. Certain jazz compositions change harmonies quickly and make demands on the improviser’s ability to produce melodic patterns that relate appropriately to the chord of the moment. Other forms and styles may present a rhythmic ostinato as a foundation for improvisation, and the improviser’s main concern would usually be to create rhythmic interest and motivic development. A stagnant musical texture or harmony demands more from an experienced improviser in terms of developing an expressive and interesting melody than does one that is harmonically complex and continually changing. Nevertheless, a stagnant texture or harmony may make improvisation easier for a young student who lacks the experience necessary to improvise over complex chord progressions or textures.

Tempo has a strong influence on the character (and often the quality) of an improvisation. Up-tempo jazz tunes, when used as vehicles for improvisation, tend to force improvisers to focus more on patterns and rote playing than on creating a setting for melodic inspiration. Nevertheless, the sheer frenetic excitement of speed and repetition are significant aspects of jazz improvisation, particularly when the improviser avoids having these qualities dominate the entire solo.

Beginning improvisers often rely on scales and other simple patterns to become familiar with the basic vocabulary of their instruments. They have to work with scales and other patterns because their aural skills and their sense of melodic development are still growing. The influence of rock on jazz improvisation has also invoked a pattern-oriented approach toward impro-

visation. Nevertheless, scales and other basic patterns are only a starting point, and improvisers who rely heavily on them often create uninteresting and unidiomatic improvisations. By and large, convincing natural instincts develop as the improviser's aural skills become stronger.

Improvisers also make use of their own melodic fragments or licks, which evolve as they gain experience. Anything from a three-note mordent to figures based on the blues scale may become incorporated into an improviser's solo (figure 1 shows the blues scale, in the key of A). These learned pathways usually find their expression in jazz by improvisers who work not only with melodies but also with motivic fragments that have a clear and specific relationship to individual chords.

Patterns based on the blues scale are easily heard and recognized. Jazz musicians use licks or riffs from scales such as the blues scale because they can be more easily heard within the context of a chord, regardless of how closely related they are to the chord harmonically. Moreover, the riff may repeat exactly, while the harmony changes. The flexibility of a particular pattern or scale (with respect to the number of chord qualities that may support it) usually determines its frequency of use as a repeated connecting melodic strand between different chords and as a repeated pattern that is transposed in relation to an unchanging chord or harmony. This is another reason why the blues scale and the major and minor pentatonic scales

are used so frequently by improvisers: any one of them, unchanged, can be used in a wide variety of chordal contexts.

Knowing how to create sequences is another important aspect of the improvisational process. The ability to move a tonal pattern through a key diatonically (in diatonic sequences) or through different keys (in tonal sequences) is a useful practice technique for the beginning improviser.



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Expressive Improvisation

Without question, one of the most difficult things for the younger student of improvisation to learn is to play less. In jazz improvisation, understatement can be one of the most effective elements. The novice is often too involved in demonstrating his or her knowledge of musical technique

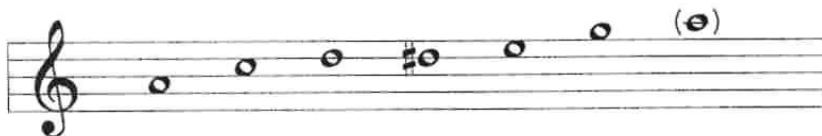
and vocabulary to understand that the qualities that move the lay listener also touch the most expert musician. Moreover, when an improviser values simplicity and rhythmic definition, technical agility and the occasional use of more elaborate melodies offer a more pronounced contrast to simpler melodies and rhythmic figures.

Since the actual ranges of many melodies found in songs commonly used as a basis for improvisation are somewhat limited, melodic improvisation best proceeds from a perspective that keeps the effective use of range as part of its goal. Improvisers often rely on range to create interest, however, when they should instead be focusing on rhythm and motivic and melodic development. Improvisers who do not consistently rely on the extended range of their instruments to compensate for a lack of rhythmic, motivic, and melodic ideas make the occasional use of range more effective. In an improvised solo, some form of high point or climax is always desirable. If the improviser is constantly moving into the highest portion of the instrument's register, each successive return becomes less expressive and effective and offers less contrast.

Since the human voice is at the heart of melody and melody is the springboard from which improvisation is created, the improviser must have an appreciation for the effective use of phrasing. For the nonwind instrumentalist, a sense of breathing helps create a more musical phrase and provides the element of space through the use of rests. Good phrasing is important in the improvisational process. Each phrase should stand out like a black figure against a white background, unlike long-winded lines, which give the listener few clues as to the improviser's development of a motive or melodic idea.

The character of the improvised solo depends a lot upon the instrument the improviser is playing. Longer notes are more readily rendered on wind and bowed instruments, unlike the piano or guitar, whose notes fade from their beginning. Since long note values and breath-dependent phrasing are principal facets of the vocal/melodic quality, wind and bowed instrument

Figure 1. The blues scale, in the key of A



players have the capacity to realize a different kind of expression than that possible on piano or acoustic guitar.

Improvisers often “prehear” what they improvise. The ability to know what a melody will sound like immediately before it is performed is essential in the art of improvisation and takes time to develop. Students can develop this ability by singing short melodic phrases or by having someone else play these phrases on another instrument and then playing the same phrases on their own instruments. This skill is somewhat different from singing along with the line as it is played on the instrument, because it requires working with groups of notes, memorizing them, and thinking about the overall direction and development of the line. Although both skills reflect an aural interaction with the instrument, hearing phrases first and then playing them is more difficult, as it forces the improviser to rely less on rote patterns while placing a greater demand on the ability to recall pitch and rhythm.



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The study of jazz improvisation often entails using numbers to indicate the relationship between each note of a melodic pattern and the root of the chord sounding at that moment. The practice may enable the student to come to certain conclusions regarding the soloist’s approach to harmony and melody; it may also facilitate the transposition of these patterns into other keys. Nevertheless, hearing



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the pattern in another key and picking out the notes in the new key without applying numbers is ultimately more worthwhile. Initially, the process is more difficult. However, one derives more value from this process as pitch discrimination results from what is heard on the instrument rather than what is organized in the conceptual realm of experience. This distinction can also be thought of as the difference, for example, between being asked to play a C major scale on the piano after being told what pitches define the C major scale and where these pitches are found on the keyboard versus being asked to play the C major scale after hearing it and trying to match these pitches, with those heard, on the keyboard.

“Losing” Oneself in the Music

As improvisers excel in musicianship and technical ability, they may have the experience of “losing” themselves in the sense that what they play seems to flow freely without conscious thought or control. The music seems to happen on its own, and the musician is simply the medium through which it passes. Eugen Herrigel describes this “state” in *Zen in the Art of Archery*:

Only the spirit is present, a kind of awareness which shows no trace of egohood and for that reason ranges without limit through all distances and depths,

with eyes that hear, and ears that see.¹

Herrigel’s description of Japanese ink painting could apply perfectly to the process of improvisation:

Mastery in ink-painting is only attained when the hand, exercising perfect control over technique, executes what hovers before the mind’s eye at the same moment when the mind begins to form it, without there being a hair’s breadth between.²

As with the performance of a memorized composition, an improvisation is usually most successful when it is allowed to happen freely and without conscious intervention or deliberation. Any interference with the flow of subconscious knowledge of a memorized work, for example, usually has a negative effect on the execution, although initially one must practice with as much awareness as possible.

Practicing the process of playing what is heard engenders a knowledge of one’s instrument which, when allowed to flow freely, gives birth to truly spontaneous and self-expressive music.³ Nevertheless, in a performance situation, the improviser often finds it difficult to match a melody or phrase that seems ideal within the musical circumstances to what is actually played. Initially, the improviser may have to rely less on his or her musical instinct and more on theory

Steps for Improvising

1. Provide a supportive classroom or studio environment. Fear is what stops many students from attempting to improvise.

2. Have students spontaneously play anything that they create on their own instrument, no matter how simple or basic. This can be an effective technique for overcoming doubt and inhibition in the student improviser.

3. Play a repeated bass figure consisting of a root-fifth relationship and then give students a scale that might be appropriate for them to use. How they use the scale (rhythmically, for example) is up to them.

4a. Have students play through a short chord progression at the piano with their left hand while singing an improvised phrase or melody. This is not easy, particularly in the beginning.

4b. Then have students play on their instrument exactly what they sang during the 4a exercise. Playing a short chord progression at the piano while singing an improvised phrase or melody develops in students the ability to coordinate the improvised melody with the harmony established in the chord progression, and playing on their instrument what they sang in the 4a exercise strengthens students' aural memory and their sense of pitch on their instrument.

5. Encourage beginning improvisers to use boundaries that limit the pitch range of their improvisation. It is often revealing to see how difficult it is for an improviser to keep the range of an improvised solo within one octave and how this forces the student to work more with the melodic and rhythmic contents of the music.

6. Have students play melodic fragments, motives, eight-measure phrases, or entire tunes and then transpose them to all keys by ear without hesitation. This exercise helps students improve their ear and their ability to "prehear" phrases. This process principally involves aural skill development, but may also involve the application of theoretical knowledge—scales, intervals, chords, and so on.

and an aural grasp of the music to guide the creation of musical lines, shapes, and forms.⁴ Ultimately, it is not how well musicians hear their way around their instruments or how much theory they know, but rather how they can achieve a balance of the two.



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In conclusion, it should be recognized that the improvisational process is a fundamental aspect of musicianship. Students who develop improvisational skills have a greater insight into the melodies and harmonies found in written music and a clearer understanding of the relationship between melody and harmony (see the Steps for Improvising sidebar for more information). Furthermore, the study of improvisation involves the student with the compositional elements, such as rhythm and thematic development, that unify a piece. Improvisation, being a "real time" activity, puts the student more in touch with the "real time" nature of music.

Notes

1. Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1971), 49.

2. *Ibid.*, 85.

3. The practice of playing what is heard may consist of transcription work and developing the ability to play or sing by ear (which would obviously include ear training). The practice might also include hearing a phrase internally (audiation) and reproducing the phrase vocally or on an instrument.

4. For additional information on introducing jazz improvisation to your students, see Bob Hinz, "Introducing Jazz Improvisation," *Teaching Music* 2, no. 5 (April 1995): 30–31. ■