



DEVELOPING CREATIVITY AND EXPRESSION THROUGH IMPROVISATION STUDY IN MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

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WHY IMPROVISATION?

Creativity and expression continue to be at the center of the rapid advances seen in today's musical landscape. With the arrival of technological platforms such as Facebook Live, Twitter, Youtube, and SoundCloud, the world's cultures influence one another in ways we could not have imagined just a few years ago. Humans also have the ability now to interact with others around the world in real-time and perform instantaneously for their followers. This injection of technology has breathed new life into our musical sensibilities. It is giving us access to new performance spaces and provides fresh perspectives on fusing cultures together musically. The College Music Society's 2014 report by the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM) confirms this connection, making the case for restructuring music in the academy to include both composition and improvisation as a stronger basis for teaching musicians today than previous models.

SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Most of our middle and high school students do not become professional musicians. They will go into retail, business, healthcare, and Information Technology. Knowing this, and to make our brief time together relevant well beyond a few percussion rehearsals, the curriculum must help develop social, personal, and professional skills for a lifetime. Improvisation is an amazing tool for curating many of these life skills for students, including communication, creativity, problem solving, teamwork, perseverance, and leadership. However, much of today's teaching centers learning on musical interpretation and technical facility at the expense of musical discovery and character development. Improvisation is a powerful tool for making a lasting positive impact on our students no matter their future career.

WHAT IMPROVISATION CAN DO FOR YOU

Comedy improv troupes have hosted corporate offsite events since the 1990s. In these events, business people take part in acting out scenes with no preparation and little scene premise—they are truly engaged in the present, encouraging them to listen deeply to their fellow actors. Through these exercises, participants not only learn how to become

“comfortable with objective facts, but with emotion and expressiveness.”¹

I began using improvisation with my students as a means of fostering creativity, musicianship, and performance skills through musical discovery. By eliminating traditional musical rules—no printed music or judgments here, folks!—students are given the freedom to create music live in real time. This is accomplished through a series of exercises and controlled parameters to gently steer the performance while the players maintain control of the musical content. Improvisation can be performed by players of all ages and ability levels—it is the ultimate democratizer. An amazing result of improvisation is that students who lacked music-reading skills or technical ability gain confidence because they are no longer interpreting someone else’s music in an attempt to achieve an expected outcome. Generating the “right” answers in real-time is liberating.

Even advanced students with incredible chops and excellent reading skills are challenged to make musical discoveries. Many programs struggle to engage their percussionists throughout a full band or orchestra rehearsal because they fail to create a culture of deep musical and philosophical contemplation. Laying the foundational awareness of nuance can improve a student’s overall musical experience and lead to greater retention rates, increased musical and technical program growth, and a larger number of students continuing music into high school.

Improvisation provides broad benefits for middle school programs. Beginning students develop basic awareness of touch and tone, discovering a variety of sounds made available by the instruments and implements they encounter. This awareness promotes a sense of confidence and composure in rehearsal and performance situations, where students are not simply trying to “hit a target”, but are executing a part with conviction and purpose.

High school improvisers develop an appreciation for subtlety while continuing to see growth in broader areas. Improvisation at this level challenges the players to employ non-verbal communication skills while expanding their performance awareness and knowledge of music forms. Students are encouraged to explore non-traditional methods of musical creation and activating an instrument (i.e. using fingers on a vibraphone, flicking a bass drum head, etc.). Make improv sessions fun by injecting them briefly throughout percussion ensemble or marching band rehearsal breaks. Inspire students to come before and after school to improvise on their own and with friends. Percussion ensemble concerts and recruiting events are perfect opportunities for your students to perform improvisations. Your percussionists can even improvise in a practice room together while the winds warm up in the main rehearsal space.

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2014/06/27/why-improv-training-is-great-business-training/#2b21be163926>

THREE APPROACHES TO IMPROVISING

Creative Music Making, a book by William (Bill) Cahn (a founding member of the percussion group NEXUS), is an invaluable resource for encouraging inquisitive reflection while practicing improvisation at any level. Cahn outlines a number of exercises designed to promote creativity and expression by implementing performance parameters. This approach also gets students actively thinking about their performances by having the teacher ask questions about the performance and the students provide verbal feedback. Sample questions include, “Who was the leader? What did you like? What would you change?” Recording these improvisations give students a chance to listen to their performance and experience it from the audiences’ perspective. Upon listening, students often comment that they didn’t realize a certain musical moment happened live. These little moments result in greater performance awareness the next time the students perform.

For another approach, try drawing shapes on a sheet of paper to inspire musical improvisation. The shapes on the page can be interpreted in a number of ways by the player, resulting in a wide variety of performances. Shapes can be a combination of swirls, dots, and lines and placed in any order. Create a series of shapes to be used in a single performance or use a single shape for the entire improvisation. A swirl shape may inspire a player to start in the middle register of a marimba and play chromatically up and down the keyboard, moving their hands in a matching swirling motion. Feel free to use the sample page I have included at the end of this article.

The Second City comedy troupe in Chicago, IL is another great inspiration for making musical improvisation. In comedy improv, participants create short stories and characters and then act out their scenes. Musicians can take a similar approach by creating a scene and playing a character as they perform. This is perhaps the most abstract, yet exciting method of making music through storytelling.

As the moderator, the teacher can control the performance parameters to fit the educational needs of the students, including dynamics, mode, meter, style, articulation, instruments, number of players, implements, rhythm, and performance space. Feel free to combine these elements in any way possible, even eliminating all parameters to engage in a completely free form improvisation.

TIPS FOR STARTING OUT

For groups new to improvisation at any level, it can often be difficult for students to put themselves out there and expose their musical and emotional selves to each other. To help, start with a large group improvising at once and encourage students to play instruments on which they’re most comfortable—this yields quick and organic results. If students say the classic line, “Well, I don’t know what to do,” remind them there are no “wrong” notes. Teacher demonstrations go a long way in getting students to open up to improvisation. As

students become comfortable with the idea, create a variety of ensemble sizes to perform and have them play instruments on which they're least comfortable. This is a wonderful way of getting students to engage those instruments they otherwise consider intimidating and working on touch and tone. For beginners, try starting with a focus on the nuances and musical possibilities of a single marimba note or single drum surface. Expand this to a dyad, chord, or scale to increase the pitch options. Introduce more instruments to the single surface setup to extend those options, too.

HOW TO DO IT

To include improvisation into your curriculum, try the following procedure:

Prepare

Determine the number of players and instruments available.

- vary the number of players and their instruments
- encourage students to play instruments they typically avoid
- Cahn approach: students in the audience should listen intently and be prepared to answer teacher-prompted questions
- Shapes approach: draw your shapes on a blank page
- Second City approach: discuss the scene premise

Start

Discuss how the performance will begin.

- instructor can signal an immediate start/stop
- instructor can signal a delayed start/stop (students come in ad lib)
- players stand quietly and start/stop without a signal

Perform

Now the fun begins.

- alter parameters for each group to keep performances fresh
- fade in/fade out improvisations work best
- try setting a timer to keep performances brief during short classes

Applaud

Every improvisation is an opportunity to practice performing.

- observing students should applaud the performers and politely encourage each other

Discuss

Get everyone talking about what they watched or played.

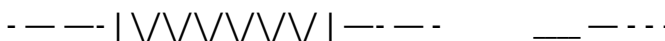
- ask questions to the students to start a conversation that gets them thinking about what they just experienced

IMPROVISATION SHAPE EXAMPLES

1)



2)



3)



4)



5)



Created by Brandon Arvay

Dr. Brandon Arvay currently lives in Lexington, KY where he regularly performs with the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, serves as the percussion instructor for the Central Kentucky Youth Orchestras, and presents workshops and recitals throughout the Southeast. He holds degrees from the University of South Carolina (B.M.E.), Colorado State University (M.M.), and the University of Kentucky (D.M.A.). He has conducted and coached a variety of ensembles, including the award-winning University of Kentucky Percussion Ensemble at the 2014 Percussive Arts Society International Convention. In his travels, he has performed throughout China and was featured on China Central Television.

For more information on Brandon's activities, please visit www.brandonarvay.com .

