

Step by Step Jazz Improvisation in the Studio and Classroom

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I. Introduction:

Improvising as a Tool for Musical Development:

Eartraining – Improvising improves intonation and the ability to learn and memorize tunes.

Theory - Improvising helps relate theory to the instrument.
Example: Notes become functions:

What if the leading tone really “leads”?
What if the root felt “heavy”?
What if the second scale degree felt “exotic”?

Composition – Improvising is spontaneous composition.

Environment - Improvising links the classroom to the outside world.

Improvising as a Tool for Personal Development:

Make quick decisions
Real-time creative problem solving
Not afraid of mistakes
Turn mistakes into opportunities

Improvising and Music Education:

The primary purpose of music education, as Orff sees it, is the development of a child's creative faculty which manifests itself in the ability to improvise.

– Arnold Walter (from the introduction to *Music for Children*)

My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise!

- Edwin Gordon (from 1998 interview by Mary Ellen Pinzino on MusicStaff.com)

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II. Middle School – first year of string instruction

Exercises (lesson 1 & 2 from *Jazz Fiddle/Viola/Cello Wizard Junior* – Mel Bay Publications, 2002):

Rhythms on the open A string:

1. Repeat the question rhythm
2. Answer the question rhythm with a different rhythm
3. Answer your own question as if you are talking to yourself

Short melodic phrases (licks) on the D minor pentatonic scale:

1. Starting on the D string, ascending only
2. Starting on the A string, ascending and descending
3. Add skips
4. Answer the phrase differently
5. Talk to yourself

You just improvised on the solo section from *Wizard Blues*!

Piece:

Wizard Blues by Martin Norgaard from Junior series.

Works well in middle school concert setting.

All pieces in the Junior series (including *Wizard Blues*) include space for improvised solos.

The solo section in each piece corresponds to the preparatory exercises in the preceding lesson.

All pieces can be performed with the CD, piano accompaniment or live rhythm section. Traditional piano part is included. If performed with a rhythm section the pianist should use jazz comping style.

Bass players can read the cello part.

Drum part is not included but most middle school drummers will want to learn the part by ear anyway. Give the drummer the CD included with the book.

Microphone placement should be as follows:

Mic 1 – place next to the conductor at a height appropriate for violinist or violist playing in standing position.

Mic 2 – place next to the cello soloist on short stand.

About 8 measures before the solo section the first violin/viola soloist walks up to the mic.

During the first solo the cello soloist turns around toward the audience and point mic 2 toward the f-hole. During the cello solo the third violin/viola soloist walks to the mic.

Comments:

Talking analogy provides ready-made tools for evaluation of improvisation:

1. Tell a story by structuring your solo like you would a good joke
2. Take rests
3. Speak in sentences
4. Utilize inflections to create interesting lines

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III. Middle School – second year of string instruction

Exercises (lesson 3 in Junior series):

G major scale exercises bridge the gap between scale and improvising:

1. The G major scale with rhythms
2. Make up your own rhythms on the scale
3. Change direction
4. Add skips

You just improvised on the solo section from *Sweet Rose*!

Piece:

Sweet Rose by Martin Norgaard from the Junior series.

See comments under *Wizard Blues* above for performance suggestions.

Comments:

This approach to improvising incorporate important principles from educational psychology and music learning theories:

1. We moved from the whole to the parts.
2. All exercises and pieces are arranged sequentially.
3. We learned by ear and will add names and symbols later.
4. Music theory will be the natural outcome of these earlier experiences.

Notice what we DIDN'T say to the students:

1. Play swing eighth and rhythms with a triplet subdivision.
2. Play over a ii-V in G then resolve to the tonic in measure 7 & 8.

IV. High School Orchestra

Written exercise:

Find the inner melody to the A section of the chord progression to *I Got Rhythm*. See other handout step 3.

Exercise:

Use the inner melody to improvise over rhythm changes:

1. Sing inner melody
2. Play inner melody
3. Play inner melody with rhythms
4. Add a couple of notes from the Bb major scale

You just improvised on the A section of *I Got Rhythm*!

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Piece:

I Got Rhythm by Gershwin, arranged by Bert Ligon.

V. Conclusion

When learning and teaching improvising utilize jazz pedagogy:

Jazz pedagogy has been developed over the last fifty years.

Even new jazz methods that break with the tradition are still a product of the tradition.

You wouldn't dream of teaching violin without considering pedagogy developed over the past four hundred years.

Jazz improvising should be a means to an end for players interested in other styles.

DON'T TEACH JAZZ BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO BUT BECAUSE YOU WANT TO!

For more information visit:

JazzFiddleWizard.com (includes sample syllabi, interviews, list of favorite arrangements and more)

JazzStringCaucus.org (official website of the Jazz String Caucus. Includes amplification information, recent jazz string clinic handouts and more)

StringsCentral.com (List of arrangements and other resources. Maintained by Julie Lyonn Lieberman)

Jazz String Method Books by Martin Norgaard:

Norgaard, Martin. *Jazz Fiddle Wizard Junior*, Pacific: Mel Bay Publications Inc., 2002. (Middle School)

Norgaard, Martin. *Jazz Viola Wizard Junior*, Pacific: Mel Bay Publications Inc., 2002. (Middle School)

Norgaard, Martin. *Jazz Cello Wizard Junior*, Pacific: Mel Bay Publications Inc., 2002. (Middle School)

Norgaard, Martin. *Jazz Fiddle Wizard*, Pacific: Mel Bay Publications Inc., 2000. (High School/College)

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