

Improvisation

WHAT is musical improvisation?

Musical improvisation is the act of creating new music in the moment of performance. This real-time form of spontaneous musical expression invites students on both individual and corporate levels to move beyond notational boundaries to demonstrate, express, and further develop their unique understandings of music and music-making.¹

We are all born improvisers. In childhood, we move from linguistic babble to words to statements to questions; we think and improvise in the language before we ever learn to read and write with understanding. Language conversation becomes the readiness for learning to read linguistic language, conversely musical improvisation becomes the readiness for learning to read music notation. In other words, “the same interactions and context clues important for listening to and spontaneously producing language are important for listening to and spontaneously producing (improvising) music.”²

WHY learn to improvise?

As discussed in the previous paragraph, improvisation becomes the readiness for learning to read and understand music notation. In addition, improvisation differentiates musicians who create from the those who only reproduce. The latter are limited musically as they are dependent on a repertoire; they are in essence just following a cake’s recipe.³ Creators, on the other hand, not only reproduce ready-made songs, they can change and enhance them, and create new melodies or harmonies automatically. Creators understand what is beyond symbology and staff.

Benefits of Improvisation

Develops

- readiness for learning to read and write
- rapid, automatic reaction to what is heard⁴
- vocabulary (tonal, rhythm, harmonic, etc.)
- self-efficacy (efficiency and ability) with the materials
- technical skills, aural skills and music-reading ability

Demonstrates

- comprehension of higher higher-order skills⁵
- musical independence
- transfer of learning⁶

Promotes

- higher-order abilities, problem solving, decision making and choice
- sensory and perceptual encoding, memory storage and recall, motor control, performance monitoring
- creativity and musical expression
- musical collaboration and social interactions⁷

¹ Farrell, F. (2018). *Improvisation in choral settings*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Toronto. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/89767/3/Farrell_Frances_201806_DMA_thesis.pdf

² Azzara, C. (2008) Improvisation and choral musicianship. In M. Holt & J. Jordan (Eds.), *The School music program: Philosophy, planning, organizing, and teaching* (p. 203). GIA Publications.

³ Improvisation in Music. (2014, August 7). What is musical improvisation? Simplifying Theory. <https://www.simplifyingtheory.com/?s=improvisation&submit=Search>

⁴ Dimhoff, T. (2003, March 31) *Improvisation games: Creating spontaneous music in groups*. http://www.acadiau.ca/~dreid/games/Game_descriptions/Improvisation_Games.html

⁵ Azzara, C. D., Snell, A. H. (2016). Assessment of improvisation in music. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935321.013.103>

⁶ Berkowitz, A. L. 2010. *The improvising mind: Cognition and creativity in the musical moment*. Oxford University Press.

⁷ Sawyer, R.K. (2011). *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching*. Cambridge University Press, p. 203.

HOW does one learn to improvise?

“Just as a vocabulary of words, not thinking, can be taught, all a teacher can do is provide students with the necessary readiness to teach themselves how to improvise. That readiness consists of acquiring a vocabulary of tonal patterns, rhythm patterns, melodic patterns (the combining of tonal and rhythm patterns), and harmonic patterns as they relate to temporal aspects in music.”⁸

Only the readiness to learn to improvise can be taught. The ‘readiness’ includes (a) building a repertoire of tunes in a variety of tonalities, meters, harmonic progression and styles and (b) building an aural-oral vocabulary of tonal, rhythm, melodic and harmonic patterns.

Building A Repertoire of Tunes

Recommended tunes to learn by rote are embedded in many of the tonal chapters. Exercises within a chapter and the *Additional Exercises* located on the Oxford Learning Link may also be used as rote songs. Remember to select literature that contains the skills and concepts that are being taught currently or in the near future. Below are suggested sites to explore for additional literature:

- Waldorf School Songs (<https://www.waldorfschoolsongs.com>)
- Kodaly Center: The American Folk Song Collection (<http://kodaly.hnu.edu/collection.cfm>)
- Choral Public Domain Library (<http://cpdl.org/wiki/>)
- IMSLP Petrucci Music Library (<https://imslp.org>)

Rote songs should be sung *a cappella* and on a neutral syllable (bum). Do not use notation or text as these will distract students from focusing on the sound as well as the concepts and/or skills being taught. Incorporating iconic representation of musical elements can aid visual and multi-modal learners and may indicate elements that notation does not. Notice in the iconic example of *Hot Cross Buns* below that (a) the iconic representation of pitch indicates the quality of the interval (whole and half steps) which cannot be seen on the staff, (b) the iconic representation of beat and beat division indicates the stressed and unstressed beats in a meter and (c) the graphic icons indicate the relationship of note durations.

HOT CROSS BUNS																
Solfège	Rhythm & Tonal Pattern 1								Rhythm & Tonal Pattern 1 Repeated							
m	[Bar]								[Bar]							
r					[Bar]								[Bar]			
d					[Bar]								[Bar]			
Beat																
Beat Division	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
Solfège	Rhythm & Tonal Pattern 2								Rhythm & Tonal Pattern 1 Repeated							
m									[Bar]							
r					[Bar]								[Bar]			
d	[Bar]												[Bar]			
Beat																
Beat Division	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑

⁸ Gordon, E.E. (2003). *Improvisation in the music classroom: Sequential learning*. GIA Publications.

Improvisation Guidelines:

- Set parameters; begin with narrow, well-defined parameters that reflect specific musical skills; work for a balance of freedom and structure.
- Focus on aural and not visual; use rote rather than note.
- Guide students through a series of improvisation experiences (activities/games) that progress from simple to complex. Promote divergent thinking rather than convergent thinking and “provoke curiosity and awareness of musical skills and understandings otherwise unexplored.”⁹
- Keep in mind that every improvisation game or activity is “a learning experience to practice both technique and musicianship.”¹⁰
- Incorporate patsching [down-up motion with hands and arms that reflect downbeat-upbeat (micro-beat)] and if possible, place the macro-beat in the feet via a heel march [only the heels are lifted; the toes remain on the ground]. Integrating body movement will improve accuracy and further internalize beat/pulse.
- Make sure the beat is inaudible.
- Avoid adding a beat between patterns or participants. Improvisation is spontaneous!
- Remember that cooperative learning groups (3-8 students) work exceptionally well, especially if the ensemble/class contains multiple levels: Like skills can be placed together and/or advanced students can be placed as a leader in each group. Group conversations/improvisations can be recorded and submitted to the instructor or used for self or peer evaluations.
- Find MP3 files of the tonal and rhythm patterns on the Oxford Learning Link. These can easily be incorporated into individual or group improvisation activities.

⁹ Freer, P. K. (2010). Choral improvisation: Tensions and resolutions. *Choral Journal*, 51(5), 30.

¹⁰ Agrell, J. (2017, March 18). Game Your Way to Improvisation. Musical U. <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/game-your-way-to-impressive-improvising-interview/>

PART I: CHAPTER 1

Simple Meter—Quarter Note = Beat Unit; Undivided Beat

Improvisation Activities

See Appendix D for details

Call and Response

• **Process:**

- Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. The instructor or Student A musically chants a rhythm pattern on a neutral syllable or rhythm syllables from Part I, Chapter 1.3. Student B (a) repeats the pattern as closely as possible, (b) makes only one change in the pattern, or (c) repeats the pattern in retrograde (reverse); Students C and D engage in the same process.

Rhythm Patterns with One Change

Rhythm Patterns in Retrograde

This activity also works musical memory!

- Variation I: The instructor/Student A chants a call from Part I, Chapter 1.3; the entire class reproduces the same pattern as closely as possible (including accents, articulation and/or dynamics.) or repeats the pattern in retrograde (reverse). The instructor or a different team member chants a new call and the class reproduces the same pattern or the pattern in retrograde.
- Variation II: Each new call begins with either the first rhythm or the last rhythm of the previous call.
- Variation III: One team improvises on a neutral syllable using the basic process while the other team(s) writes (dictates) the patterns.¹¹
- Variation IV: Instructor or team leader indicates the beat function element [elongated beat, beat, divided beat, subdivided beat, borrowed beat, etc.] to audiate. The instructor/Student A chants a pattern from Part I, Chapter 1.3 on rhythm syllables or a neutral syllable. The next student echoes the patterns chanting on rhythm syllables or a neutral syllable audiating (silent singing) the prescribed beat function element.

Audiate Beat Function Element

A. Audiate elongated function rhythms in the pattern.

B. Audiate beat function rhythms in the pattern.

- Variation V: Individually practice *Call and Response* alternating the three options listed in the basic process, using the MP3 rhythm files found in Part I, Chapter 1, located on the Oxford Learning Link.

Improvisation develops readiness for learning to read and write.

¹¹ Dimhoff. *Improvisation games*.

Parameters:

- Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 1.3. The instructor or team leader designates length of patterns (1-2 measures), the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, circular hand/arm motion, and/or down-up motion) and then sets the tempo.
- Remember to perform the patterns (a) with inflective expression (foundation of phrasing) and (b) while moving to meter, macro beat, or micro beat (facilitates understanding of rhythm).¹²

The goal is to develop spontaneous, rapid, automatic reaction to what is heard.

Add A Rhythm

Process:

- Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. Using rhythm syllables, Student A chants a known two beat rhythm pattern from Part I, Chapter 1; Student B echoes the pattern and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; Student C echoes the patterns chanted by Student A and B and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; Student D echoes the patterns chanted by Student A, B and C and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; etc.

Add A Two Beat Rhythm Pattern

The notation shows two rows of rhythmic patterns in 2/4 time. Row 1: Pattern A (quarter, quarter), Pattern B (quarter, quarter), Pattern C (quarter, quarter), and Pattern D (quarter, quarter). Row 2: Pattern E (quarter, quarter), Pattern F (quarter, quarter). Each pattern is represented by a sequence of notes and rests on a staff.

- Variation I: One team improvises on a neutral syllable using the process listed above while the other team(s) writes the patterns (dictates) the patterns.
- Variation II: Integrate accents, articulations and/or dynamic into the rhythm patterns.

Parameters:

- Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 1.3. The instructor designates the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, circular hand/arm motion, and/or down-up motion) and then sets the tempo.
- Remember to perform the patterns while moving to meter, macro beat, or micro beat.

This activity also works musical memory!

Same or Different

Process:

- Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. The instructor or Student A chants a known rhythm pattern (neutral syllable or rhythm syllables); Student B echoes the pattern exactly or improvises a similar but different pattern that uses the elements from Part I, Chapter 1. The class or individuals indicate whether the patterns were the same or different.

¹² Edwin Gordon, *Basics of Vocal and Instrumental Harmonic Improvisation* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013), 11–12; Azzara and Grunow, iv–v. See page 12 for definition of macro and micro beat.

Same or Different Rhythm Patterns

A $\frac{3}{4}$ ♩ ♩ **B** || ♩ ♩ *Different* **C** || ♩ ♩ ♩ **D** || ♩ ♩ ♩ *Same* ||

- Variation I: One team improvises on a neutral syllable while the other team(s) writes (dictates) each pattern.
- Variation II: Student A chants a known rhythm pattern; Student B echoes the pattern exactly or improvises a similar pattern on his/her instruments.
- Variation III: Individually practice *Same or Different* using the MP3 rhythm files found in Part I, Chapter 1, located on the Oxford Learning Link.
- **Parameters:**
 - Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 1.3. The instructor designates the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, circular hand/arm motion, and/or down-up motion) and then sets the tempo.

Remember that the primary goal is to create interesting and musical rhythms.