

Balancing the Eye and the Ear

You Can Teach Improvisation

by Bradley Sowash

“**T**here are only two kinds of music: good and bad.” This statement has been variously attributed to Louis Armstrong, Richard Strauss and Duke Ellington. It rings true regardless of who said it. Even as our students’ iPod culture divides music into ever more splintered sub-genres, we might ask them to consider a similar category busting statement: “There are only two approaches to making music: eye and ear.” *Eye players* read music. *Ear players* improvise. Today’s students need instruction in both. Why? Because students that read well *and* play by ear can perform a wider range of styles, are more engaged and, therefore, more likely to “stick with it.” Perhaps you are among the many teachers who would like to augment their teaching style with explorations into improvisation but are not sure where to begin. The good news is that the basic theory and music reading you already teach provide an ideal foundation for students learning to improvise. Use the techniques outlined below in your next lesson to show them how to enter the fascinating world of making music “off the page.”

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Written Music as A Basis for Improvisation

Master improvisers may seem to make music out of thin air, but students need a context for creativity. For the following exercises, help the student select a short piece that makes use of three or four diatonic chords in the left-hand part. Method books abound with chord-based selections, as do collections of folk songs, children’s music, holiday music or “three chord” pop songs. I’ll use “Burrito Cha Cha” as a demonstration piece for this article.

Begin by asking the student to *learn the selection exactly as it is written*. Improvising is a reward for good reading. See the rationale here? The student understands that the eye and ear are equally valued and improvising is a treat rather than a frightening prospect.

((Example 1))

"Burrto Cha Cha," from *That's Jazz, Book 1, Getting Into It* by Bradley Sowash
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Analyze the Chords

Once the selection is mastered as written, help the student understand the underlying harmony. For example, the broken chord bass line in the A section of "Burrto Cha Cha" is derived from the primary I, IV and V7 chords.

((Example 2))

Bass line in first four measures

Bass line reduced to primary chords in common inversions

Ask the student to play the left-hand chords in time while you accompany him. You can play simple quarter notes on

the roots of the chords or transpose the original left-hand-part bass line down an octave.

It's always a good idea to accompany the student in jazz styles because your playing defines the beat. One of the rules of jazz improvisation is that a steady beat is more important than correct notes. In the parlance of jazz, it's okay to play a "clam" now and then but the music must "groove." So resist the temptation to pause even if the student tries to buy time to search for the next chord. You want him to feel the necessity of "making the changes" in time.

Improvising with Scales

1. Scale and Chords

Improvisation at the piano is a whole-brain activity. The left hand has the specific job of playing the correct chords at the correct times while the right hand creatively improvises. Ease the student into coordinating these left- and right-brain tasks by asking him to play a right-hand scale using only eighth notes in the key of the piece you selected, while the left hand plays the chords. Continue to support the student by playing the bass line throughout the following exercises.

((Example 3))

2. Change Directions

Next, ask the student to change directions up or down whenever they like, while keeping the eighth notes going with no skips. Note that the written portions of examples 4-6 are included only to illustrate the concepts. Each student's improvisation should sound differently.

((Example 4))

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3. Mix Rhythms

When the student is ready to go on, ask him to mix up the rhythm by making some of the notes longer. Avoid specifying a specific length, for example quarter notes, because this tends to squelch syncopation, such as the tied notes in example 5.

((Example 5))



4. Add Leaps

Finally, ask your student to add in some leaps (non-contiguous) notes. Because “leap” can mean any interval, it is a better word than “skip” which specifically implies thirds.

((Example 6))



5. Put it in Context

Relate these exercises back to the original selection by adding improvisation. As to form, here's a possible “road map.”

- Play the selection the first time as written.
- Next, repeat the A section (usually 8 or 16 measures) while improvising.
- Finish out the remaining B section as written.

Why This Works

In my experience, if you ask novice improvisers to “play whatever you want over these chords,” they will usually freeze. The value of breaking it down is that the students feel comfortable attempting each new challenge. By the time they've gone through the above steps, they are actually improvising very freely. That's because changing directions,

mixing rhythms and adding leaps is very nearly playing “whatever you want.” However, getting there step-by-step helps the possibilities unfold. Use these exercises with each new scale/key you teach. Your students will gain hand independence, hear better how scales fit with chords and become more confident improvisers.

Improvising is for Everyone

Improvising is as essential as reading music. Both should be taught to all music students. Why? As we've seen from the above exercise, improvisation is applied music theory. Every musician's toolbox should include a basic understanding of keys, scales and harmony. Knowing how music works leads to a deeper interpretation of written music even as it opens the doors to greater self-expression. From a practical standpoint, all musicians will eventually be called upon to improvise. For example, what does one play when the

“ *Improvising is as essential as reading music* ”

wedding march reaches the double bar for the second time and the bride is still only half way down the aisle? Pit orchestra musicians are sometimes asked to cover a lag in the show. Those that can fill in with a couple of vamps and licks are certain to be asked back. And what pianist hasn't been asked to accompany impromptu renditions of “Happy Birthday” or holiday favorites? Regardless of the kind of music they choose to play—good or bad, pianists who can read *and* improvise are headed for a lifetime of versatile, creative music making.

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