

## **Exploring the Void: An Approach to Teaching Music Through Improvisation in a Variety of Classroom Settings**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholarship has increasingly recognized the value of improvisation in musical pedagogy. Beginning with the pioneering work of such pedagogues as Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and Carl Orff, improvisation has grown from an approach reserved for teaching young children to now being included within the standards for collegiate accreditation set by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). The most recent version of the association's *Handbook* (2007-08, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) mandates that, in order to achieve the standards for the bachelor of music degree:

Students must acquire a rudimentary capacity to create derivative or original music both extemporaneously and in written form: for example, the imitation of various musical styles, improvisation on pre-existing materials, the creation of original compositions, experimentation with various sounds sources, and manipulation of the common elements in non-traditional ways.<sup>1</sup>

While this standard clearly articulates an accepted recognition of the value of teaching improvisation at the college level, a clear understanding of how improvised musical activity should be implemented in core music curricula does not exist.

The inclusion of jazz studies has done much to provide access to improvisation within academic programs, however, jazz improvisation classes and performing ensembles often remain a special course of study for those particularly inclined towards jazz music and tend to exclude musicians who do not play instruments typically

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<sup>1</sup> MENC: The National Association for Music Education – a powerful arts education organization serving to promote music education since 1907 – has similarly mandated the teaching of composition and improvisation at the elementary and secondary school levels since 1994.

associated with jazz. Jazz music's complex harmonic language and virtuosic traditions can make the music seem unapproachable to some as well as impeding the ease of expression for the beginning improviser. Furthermore, improvisational roles in jazz ensembles are often limited to selected soloists. These factors combine to limit the effectiveness of jazz programs as a solution to introducing all music students to improvisation.

The lack of clarity as to how improvisational goals should be met within college curricula has elicited a direct, although somewhat vague, response from the NASM in the form of an advisory note available online and included as an appendix to this paper. This advisory states that, "NASM does not promote a particular approach to this composition and improvisation standard."<sup>2</sup> Instead, it asserts that the music teaching community as a whole must work together in a long-term effort to determine how to achieve these goals.

As is the case with all NASM standards, the goal is to focus on the development of student capabilities, not to set bureaucratic requirements for the operation of music units...perhaps the best place to start is by determining present goals and objectives for student competence in composition and improvisation – in other words, starting with the *what* and the *why* before proceeding to the *how*. Often, when *what* and *why* questions are answered thoroughly, the *how* questions answer themselves.<sup>3</sup>

While this stance is somewhat evasive, I applaud the NASM for recognizing the level of difficulty that these goals present. Traditional music pedagogy since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century has been largely concerned with the development of interpretive skills. While

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<sup>2</sup> National Association of Schools of Music Advisory page 2 – See Appendix A

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

composition has traditionally been offered as a special course of study, improvisation has been all but ignored.

Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, improvisation played an integral role in all aspects of Western art music from its composition to the interpretation of the score. Ernst Ferand, one of the foremost and most often cited scholars on improvisation, could not emphasize the importance of improvisation in the development of Western art music as we know it today:

There is scarcely a single field in music that has remained unaffected by improvisation, scarcely a musical technique or form of composition that did not originate in improvisatory performance or was not essentially influenced by it. The whole history of the development of music is accompanied by manifestations of the drive to improvise.<sup>4</sup>

Robin Moore, in one of the few attempts since Ferand to examine the historical decline in the practice of improvisation, states that:

It is clear that only in the past hundred and fifty years attitudes towards improvisation in Western classical performance have changed drastically. The mandates of compositionally specified interpretation now supercede those of the instrumentalist. To many, improvisatory expression seems threatening, unfamiliar, or undeserving of interest. This radical shift in performance aesthetic has occurred without incident and virtually without documentation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Ferand. *Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology With an Historical Introduction*. Series Title: *Anthology of Music*, ed. K.G. Fellerer. (Köln: Arno Volk Verlag, 1961), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Moore. "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: And Interpretation of Change." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (June 1992): 63.

Mandating improvisation as a core skill to be developed by students represents a paradigmatic shift that will require long-term effort. The above mentioned advisory from the NASM acknowledges this as follows:

The Association understands that instant change on a matter of this kind is not possible, that the pace of change and improvement will vary from music unit to music unit, and that there will be much experimentation both within and among institutions. However, it is equally understood that if, over time, all institutions work to address the standard and thus build composition and improvisation competencies in their students, the capacities of all graduates will be enlarged for service to the field, its patrons, and its future students.<sup>6</sup>

It is towards this endeavor that I offer this study. No matter how it is attained, I firmly believe that the reinstitution of improvisation as an integral part of music making in the college environment will not only be of service to the education of students, but serve to enliven our field in general.

Without prior experience, teachers can too easily find teaching improvisation uncomfortable and inaccessible. Stripped of the safety net of notes on a page, students can easily feel uncomfortable with improvisation as well. This presents perhaps the largest obstacle to the inclusion of improvisation and serves to perpetuate its absence in the classroom. It is the purpose of this article to offer an approach to introducing group improvisational activities into the classroom in a way that is accessible to teacher and student alike regardless of their level of experience with improvisation or specific classroom instrumentation. I will do this through in-depth description, discussion, and analysis of suggested introductory improvisatory activities. My discussion will primarily focus on a model activity that is both simple and highly expandable. The primary goal of

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<sup>6</sup> National Association of Schools of Music Advisory page 2 – See Appendix A

this activity is to develop a comfort level between the facilitator and students in the classroom in order to initiate exploration and inquiry into music through improvisation. I will attempt to show how simple modifications to this activity may be designed and implemented to teach specific musical topics within a variety of classroom settings.

While the activities I present are informed by an understanding of improvised music traditions, the approach detailed herein does not intend to teach any particular musical tradition. These activities may be used in a variety of classroom settings. For sake of clarity and brevity, examples designed specifically for three different classroom settings will be discussed: the aural-skills classroom, the coached chamber ensemble, and the group composition class or seminar. Although my discussion focus on applications for college level students, the described techniques and exercises may also be useful at the secondary school level. Special attention will be given to the role of the facilitator.

This paper is informed by my research and experience with teaching classroom improvisation during my time as a graduate student at Duke University. During this time I designed and taught a semester-long elective course entitled “Musical Improvisation for the Non-Improvising Musician.” All of my students were freshmen with various backgrounds in music – some of which were not classically trained and did not read music fluently. Two appendices follow the main body text that reference recorded improvisations that took place during this class. These recordings can be heard on the CD that accompanies this article. My approach is also informed by my background as a performer of freely improvised music and as a composer of both traditionally notated and improvised music.

### Overview of Approach:

Much has been written recently questioning the distinction between traditional concepts of composition, improvisation, and performer interpretation. For the purpose of this study, I frame improvisation as music that asks performers to make choices or provide musical content in the course of performance beyond what is asked of them in traditionally notated music<sup>7</sup>. My work relies on the premise that improvisation should be understood and taught as a process of composition in the course of performance.

Composers of western classical music traditionally utilize the written score to give them high levels of control over the performers' interactions that take place within their music. The information contained in the score can be considered a detailed set of instructions for musicians to create music together. Similarly, improvised music is informed by specific guidelines and parameters that musicians follow when improvising together. These take on many different forms and help to organize the music as it is being made.

In his writings on improvisation, Bruno Nettle uses the terms *points of reference* and *building blocks* to describe predetermined elements in improvised music. These elements can take on many different forms. Traditional small group jazz improvisation, for example, relies on harmonic progressions within a given cyclical form. These progressions can be considered the harmonic building blocks of jazz. In classical Indian music, on the other hand, performances often open with a long improvised section called an *alap* that contains no organizing rhythmic or harmonic guidelines. These sections are organized around a central tone and a highly intricate modal and motivic framework

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<sup>7</sup> For further and exhaustive discussion of this topic see: Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

known as *raga* within a prescribed dynamic arch. While the motivic aspects of *Raga* can be considered melodic building blocks, the central tone, mode, and form of *Alap* are good examples of what Nettle might consider points of reference<sup>8</sup>.

The approach described in this article uses the knowledge of these internal guiding parameters in improvised music as a central conceptual underpinning. Starting from a “blank slate” context where anything is allowed or possible within each group improvisation, exercises can be brought into focus through the addition of performance criteria that shape and guide the students’ interactions. It is on this point that this method differs most greatly from many of the non-traditional approaches to teaching improvisation that exist today<sup>9</sup>. Instead of the activities being focused towards teaching free-form improvisation, each activity is directed towards specific musical and educational outcomes by carefully controlling and balancing predetermined and free aspects within them. In this way, the freedom that is essential to any improvised activity can be directed towards the exploration of specific educational goals.

The model introductory activity presented below is a commonly used method where students cumulatively build improvised textures based on short repeating motives. Using this technique as a starting point, modifications are made that restrict or expand the activity through guiding parameters that isolate certain musical features while concurrently encouraging further exploration as students become more comfortable with

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<sup>8</sup> Nettle describes these ideas in great detail as they relate to various forms of world music in both: Bruno Nettle. “Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach.” *The Musical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (January 1974): 1-19. and: Bruno Nettle. “Introduction: An Art Neglected in Scholarship,” *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, edited by Bruno Nettle with Melinda Russell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 1.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of such approaches see: William L. Cahn, *Creative Music Making*. Routledge, 2005. or Tom Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*. Self published on the internet, 1994. See also the 4-year “Art of Improvisation” degree program offered by Music for People – a non-profit organization headed by jazz/new age cellist David Darling.

improvisation. These additional criteria can take many forms, including: 1) harmonic guidelines such as specific tonal centers or harmonic progressions, 2) melodic guidelines such as using particular intervals, scales or motives prominently, 3) rhythmic guidelines such as playing within a particular meter or using specific rhythmic features prominently, 4) formal guidelines such as predetermined affective characteristics, dynamic shapes, or loosely defined compositional schemes, 5) performance information such as defined ensemble cues that precipitate certain actions within the ensemble or predetermined orders of entry or orders of soloists within the ensemble. In addition to focusing the exercises towards specific educational goals, these additional layers of information are similar in design to features that exist within traditions of improvised music. This helps to create a link between the somewhat abstract nature of these exercises and existing improvisational traditions.

Other levels of background information in improvised music are more cultural in nature. These aspects include certain stylistic features that give each type of music its defining characteristics. Examples include the rhythmic features of swing in jazz or polyrhythm in much of the music of Africa. Other examples include timbral and gestural characteristics such as the highly refined methods of singing across the break between head and chest voice found in Arabic and Zimbabwean music or the highly emotive growling and swooping gestures of the blues. While these features can be described in purely musical terms, other characteristics of improvised music exist that are highly personal and interpersonal in nature. These include modes of musical conceptualization

and internalization, pedagogical and performance practices, and the various meanings and cultural functions ascribed to the music.<sup>10</sup>

Developing an understanding of these cultural and stylistic attributes is essential to learning to improvise within any given musical tradition. Courses and ensembles in jazz studies at American universities and colleges, for example, operate entirely from within the jazz tradition as it is understood today in style, teaching, and modes of representation.<sup>11</sup> Courses that teach improvised music of various cultures around the world maintain focus on these cultural aspects as well.<sup>12</sup> Unlike tradition-based methods of teaching, however, the approach I propose attempts to operate within a context that is inexplicit in regards to stylistic content. It is not intended to teach from or towards any given tradition of improvised music, but to openly draw upon the individual and collective experiences that exist within each classroom. As such, students should feel free to bring influences into their improvisations from any imagined source. Musical style is not assumed but emerges through a process of mediation between the directives of each exercise and the creativity of the students.

### Role of the Facilitator:

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<sup>10</sup> The cultural and interpersonal dimensions of improvised music have been written about extensively in the work of Paul Berliner. For further information see: Paul Berliner: *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. and Paul Berliner. *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> This is especially true today as the current state of jazz in the United States has witnessed an almost full relocation of the tradition from its roots as a popular music to being fully entrenched in modern conservatory culture. For further discussion, see: Scott Devaux "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography." *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (fall 1991): 525-560.

<sup>12</sup> Specific examples of such courses exist within the degree programs in world music offered within the CalArts School of Music, courses on Zimbabwean Mbira music offered by Paul Berliner at Duke University, and the many Gamelan orchestras that exist in numerous colleges and universities throughout the United States.

What should the role of the facilitator in improvisational settings be and how should teachers participate in beginning improvisations? William L. Cahn asserts that beginning improvisation, “be limited to two players, with one of the performers, ideally the facilitator, already possessing an in-depth experience in free-form improvisation.”<sup>13</sup> This is similar to the teaching methods of many other cultures of improvised music and is perhaps best exemplified by the relationship between *guru* and student in Indian music.<sup>14</sup> While the directness of this approach is undeniable, this model requires facilitators be experienced improvisers themselves – a requirement that does not fit the purpose of this study.

On the contrary, it is my experience that direct musical involvement from the facilitator is *not* necessary for the purposes of the activities presented. In fact, I believe that this can hinder student creativity by unnecessarily establishing a hierarchical, “leader and follower” effect. The most important role of the facilitator in this context is not to improvise with their students, but to guide student-led improvisations. The facilitator’s role in this context is to *listen, recognize, and emphasize* the elements of student improvisations that are rich in potential for further growth. By simply pointing out and applauding them when these moments occur, a facilitator is able to foster a sense of accomplishment, excite the classroom, break down defensive barriers, and lead students towards attaining a comfort level with expressive improvisation.

Examples of what is expected of the students, when not available through live performance or direct involvement by the facilitator can be given in the form of

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<sup>13</sup> William L. Cahn, *Creative Music Making*. (Routledge, 2005), 35-36.

<sup>14</sup> Similar methods of teaching improvisation based upon students modeling more experienced musicians have been well documented in both jazz and Zimbabwean music by Paul Berliner in *Thinking in Jazz* and *Soul of Mbira* respectively.

recordings. The model example described directly below relies heavily upon an understanding of the aesthetics of minimalist music and the types of textures that exemplify this music. As such, your work with the students should be prefaced by listening, discussing, and performing (if the class is capable) examples of this type of music. Terry Riley's minimalist classic, *In C*, is a perfect model as the textures that this piece builds are achieved through improvisatory means. Similarly, recorded music of any type may be used as a model for improvised responses. Appendix B and the first four tracks of the CD that accompany this paper provide documentation of the efficacy of this technique as it relates to 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist music. The power of example through recordings should be incorporated throughout your work with the students regardless of what direction it may take.

#### The Model Activity:

Depending on the size and instrumentation of the classroom, divide the students into roughly equal sized ensembles of no more than ten students each. Arrange each ensemble in an approximate circle. Begin by having one of the students play a simple repeating motive of their invention. The motive should contain only a few notes and may be played in pulsed or free rhythm and with or without reference to a specified harmony. Moving around the circle, have the students in the ensemble successively enter the texture by adding their own repeating motives that complement the original. The end result of this exercise should be a static texture of surprising complexity. Let the activity develop organically with as little explanation as possible. Trust that the students will respond creatively to the music as it is being made, but do your best to guide them if they

feel lost or need assistance. After the entire ensemble has entered, let them continue playing the resulting texture for multiple repetitions before bringing the ensemble to a stop.

The simplicity of this exercise is its greatest asset in introducing improvisation. While each student is only responsible to contribute a simple motive, beautiful and complex textures are easily formed by the motives in combination with each other. As the students successively enter, the texture gradually unfolds producing a dramatic sense of development. However, the music quickly becomes static after all of the students have entered. Here lies a hidden advantage of the exercise. This sudden feeling of stasis creates a compelling desire for the music to continue developing. Experience has shown me that some of the students will commonly respond by beginning to vary their motives or improvise melodies. This should not be looked upon as a break from the directives of the exercise. Instead, the creative impetus achieved represents a step leading to more interactive improvisations.

After the students have completed the above exercise, lead them in a discussion over what transpired. If more than one ensemble is present within the classroom, be sure to include everyone in the discussion. Emphasize that all of the students in the class should be engaged as active listeners at all times. Direct the discussion towards describing the music specifically in terms of both the resultant sound and of the characteristics of each motive. What were the resulting rhythmic characteristics? Was the music in any specific meter? If pulsed, what was the tempo? How did the motives relate to each other rhythmically? Was the music in any specific key or mode or could a specific pitch be considered central? How much contrast existed between motives?

Whose motives were related to each other and how were they related? Was there a sense of cause and effect or call and response between any of the motives? Is there any way to group the motives into specific categories such as long or short-note motives or high or low-note motives? These are only a few examples of the many points of discussion that are possible in response to this activity. Their breadth exemplifies how simple improvisations can lead to a wide array of learning experiences.

Further repetitions of the exercise can be modified to create variance by giving simple instructions that direct performances toward more specifically defined outcomes. For example, if the first time through the exercise resulted in music in duple meter, instruct the students to improvise within a contrasting metric feel or in free rhythm. Directions can also be given that are more poetic in nature. If a previous performance resulted in legato, flowing music, instruct the students to improvise in a more incisive, staccato style or in a way that suggests the nightmarish scurrying of small creatures. Differing types of performance directions can be used to help steer students towards particular musical outcomes and should be used judiciously by the facilitator. Directions that are poetically suggestive can stir the imaginations of students needing a creative boost and keep the activity from becoming too sterile or academic. Instructions that are more technically specific can center the activity on learning when the students' imaginations are running high. These tools can help to foster and maintain a classroom atmosphere that balances focused learning with creative expression and exploration.

Subsequent repetitions of the exercise may expand the resulting textures into improvisations that are freer in nature. If the ensemble already shows an impulse towards motivic variation and/or soloistic improvisation, allow this to occur naturally and

encourage the students to follow their instincts. If the ensemble does not display this tendency, demonstrate how motives can be varied through simple modifications to pitch and rhythm. This discussion should attempt to spark the imagination and should not immediately focus upon specific terminology associated with variation techniques.

Various reactions to this exercise are possible. One extreme possibility occurs when more gregarious students abandon their motives entirely and break into melodic improvisations. While these students' boldness should be applauded, if enough students demonstrate this tendency the communicative nature of the improvisation as well as its directives become lost entirely. This perhaps occurs from the students' desire to interject melody into the more motivic music that this exercise creates. However, it is also most likely related to the common misconception that improvisation is synonymous with virtuosic instrumental solos. Without discouraging the students, direct them to create interest by blending into the texture and building upon their own motives and those of other students.

At the other end of the spectrum are students who react to the exercise in an uninspired or timid way. Playing music without the written page can make students feel exposed and vulnerable. While giving students concrete examples of ways to vary their motives will help to make this exercise more accessible on a surface level, helping these students become comfortable with improvisation is a far more challenging goal. This must be done gradually through fostering a classroom environment that encourages creative exploration without the fear of chastisement. In order to improvise, students must be willing to risk playing beyond their comfort level in a context where clear distinctions between right and wrong no longer exist. Let them know that there is

nothing they can do that is explicitly wrong. It may take time for students to get used to this idea since, for many of them, much of their training will have focused on playing music correctly. Reinforce this idea by praising shy students when they demonstrate a willingness to engage the music more wholeheartedly – even if executed poorly.

Exploration and inquiry in this context is more important than the actual sound produced. Every attempt should be made to listen through students' technical limitations in order to hear their creative intentions.

Classroom dynamics can vary widely and students representing a spectrum between these extremes will likely exist within each classroom. While this exercise is useful for introducing improvisation to beginners, students should soon be ready for further challenges. The amount of time and number of sessions this takes may vary from classroom to classroom. Facilitators must remain flexible and attempt to attune themselves with the needs of the students in order to appropriately pace the rate of advancement. While specific exercises will be recommended, they are not intended as a regimented course of study. Rather, they are presented as models that demonstrate ways that improvisational activities can be designed for specific instructional goals. The classroom environment should allow students to progress at their own rate and experiment with divergent ideas as they surface.

### The Aural Skills Classroom:

Aural skills classrooms offer a unique environment for introducing improvisation as they are an integral part of any core music curricula and are commonly held as lab sections with small classroom sizes and in workshop fashion. While the majority of aural skills classroom activities are sung, these activities offer a chance for instrumentalists to work on their primary instruments. This may require a bit of creativity on the part of the facilitator to find alternate spaces that accommodate the needs of the class. If the class contains multiple pianists, have them take turns at the class piano while the others sing or play keyboards or move the class to a studio with multiple keyboards. Have percussionists bring a mallet instrument of their choice or move the class to a room where percussion equipment already exists.

Aural skills training traditionally concerns itself with musical recognition and reproduction through the acts of translating sound into notation (interval ID, melodic and harmonic dictation, etc.) and translating notation into sound (sight-singing, error detection, etc). Improvisation can build upon this paradigm by requiring students to not only recognize and reproduce sounds during the course of performance, but to creatively manipulate these sounds as they are being performed. In the words of Kate Covington:

Improvisation is important because it is able to fuse the three primary musical activities of composition, performance, and critical listening/analysis; it involves all three simultaneously... Improvisation in aural pedagogy should not be just a discretionary choice but an essential component; theories of learning and cognition are demonstrating

that a skill like improvisation has the potential to be the catalyst for a level of aural synthesis and understanding not being attained by more traditional means.<sup>15</sup>

Designing simple extensions to the model activity that are accessible to beginners and particularly valuable for the aural skills classroom can easily be accomplished by incorporating elements of modified call and response. The leader of each round begins with a call that must be recognized and creatively built upon with each subsequent entry. The following example focuses on using specified intervals in a tonal context:

Divide the students into groups of around 4-6 performers each, pick a key (major or minor) for the exercise, and have the students play through the scale in order to establish it aurally. As before, have the students successively enter and build a texture of simple repeated motives. This time, however, restrict the motives to contain only melodic seconds occurring naturally within the key. After everyone has entered into the texture, have the student sitting next to the student who initiated the texture change their motive to one of contrasting character and containing only melodic thirds occurring within the key. This action should serve as a cue to have the other students one after another change their own motives in response to the character of the new motive using only melodic thirds. The exercise should then continue as before slowly making its way successively through larger and larger intervals until reaching the octave if so desired. Instruct the students to try to make the moments of transition between motives as smooth and musical as possible. The resulting sound should be kaleidoscopic with the textures slowly shifting through expanding melodic intervals. As students become more proficient with this exercise, challenge them by freeing the order in which intervals may

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<sup>15</sup> Kate Covington, "Improvisation in the Aural Curriculum: An Imperitive." *College Music Symposium* 37 (Fall 1997): 49.

appear so that the intervals must be identified in the course of performance. Other layers of complexity can be added by allowing each interval to be played along with its inversion or by removing the tonal context and requiring that only one interval class be used at a time (for example, all Major 3rds).

The above exercise uses improvisational constraints to focus it on intervals. Limiting the students to play only one interval at a time allows each interval to be understood and its sound studied and internalized. The repetitive quality of the exercise also facilitates analysis of the intervals in relation to each other and the key. While each interval is approached in isolation, students use them creatively within a dynamic musical context rather than studying the sound in isolation. This allows each interval to be studied from different perspectives as it would be heard in real-world musical contexts. Again in the words of Covington:

If a concept is acquired in only one context, it will be wedded to that context and will not likely be spontaneously accessible and able to be used in new settings. An example might be the teaching of a perfect fourth only in isolation and always in connection with the March from *Lohengrin*. Successful learning involves the revisiting of the same material at different times, in varied contexts, for different reasons and from different conceptual perspectives for attaining the goals of advanced knowledge acquisition.<sup>16</sup>

#### The Coached Chamber Ensemble:

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Covington, "Improvisation in the Aural Curriculum: An Imperative." *College Music Symposium* 37 (Fall 1997): 52. Covington supports this assertion and her imperative through ideas of constructivist learning posited by psychologists Rand Spiro and M. David Merrill.

Musical performance of any kind requires musical sensitivity and communication between performers. Non-verbal methods of communication in music include head-bobs, rhythmic swaying, exaggerated breathing, arm or hand gestures, and direct eye contact - to name only a few. This need is especially great in chamber music as performers must play without the aid of a conductor. Improvisational activities offer a unique opportunity to help students develop these necessary skills. Improvisation is, by definition, unpredictable and spontaneous. In order to play music together without prior knowledge of its outcome, improvisers must develop the ability to convey their intentions while being sensitive and receptive to other musicians and the direction of the ensemble as a whole. The following alteration to the model activity is intended to focus upon teaching these abilities to members of a regularly meeting student chamber ensemble, but may be equally useful in other contexts as well.

The classroom setting of the coached chamber ensemble offers an advantage over the aural skills classroom in that students are usually expected to have their primary instruments with them at all times. The intimate setting and small size of most ensembles add to this to make it an ideal situation for improvisation. Improvisational activities can be easily approached as short (10-15 minute) warm-up exercises before a rehearsal period begins or, if multiple ensembles exist in each classroom, as extended sessions where ensembles perform for each other with classroom discussions following each performance.

Begin by leading the ensemble through a performance of the model exercise. If the classroom contains more than one ensemble, have the entire class perform together at first to help develop a comfort level with the activity. While the small number of parts in

a chamber ensemble performance will not as easily produce the level of complexity attained by a larger ensemble, smaller ensembles will create textures that are more transparent and easily malleable – an advantage that the following exercise will exploit.

After the class has become comfortable with the model exercise in small group performance, lead them in a discussion on how performers indicate to each other how music starts, stops, and changes tempo and/or dynamic. This discussion should focus on types of bodily cues. After discussing, have each student practice cueing the beginning and end of a sustained pitch or a series of steady rhythmic attacks while playing within their ensemble. Direct each leader to begin their turn with a specific dynamic level, tempo (if applicable), and emotional impetus in mind and have them try to communicate these aspects to the ensemble entirely through non-verbal methods with each beginning cue. Softly longing sustained tones might be cued with a deep inhale accompanied by wistful eyes. A fiery marching tempo might be led by an intense expression, a few quick nods of the head, and a short inhale to clearly show the beginning of a round. Try to encourage the students to be as animated and exaggerated as possible while keeping their intentions clear. As students begin to get the hang of this exercise, challenge each leader to lead their ensemble through changes of tempo and dynamic within each round prior to ending.

Now that the students have had experience with leading the ensemble through starts, stops, and changes in tempo and dynamic, have them translate these skills to the model activity. Play should follow as before, but instruct the leader of each round to steer the ensemble through drastic changes of dynamic and tempo before bringing each round to a clearly articulated end. Extend each performance by having the next student

assume the role of the leader and immediately begin a new round of play. Continue as before until returning to the original leader. This exercise should produce short, textural movements that expressively fluctuate in tempo and dynamic.

As students become more comfortable with the exercise, have the leader of each round break out of rigid repetition into improvised melody after all members of the ensemble have entered into the texture. Instruct the other members of the ensemble to listen closely to each leader/soloist and to follow their intentions while providing a supportive role. Encourage each leader/soloist to continue including changes of tempo and dynamic in their improvisations. Be sure to listen to how the students interact and lead them in discussions about the differences between being a soloist and accompanist while highlighting the concepts of foreground and background in music.

This exercise may be further extended and modified in a variety of ways. Parameters such as specified meters, keys or harmonic changes may be added to the exercise. Conversely, these may be excluded entirely for completely free-form improvisations. Facilitators should be sensitive to the needs and desires of the students and design alterations as they see best fit.

This series of exercises - perhaps more than the others I outline- may be the most effective in leading students towards a level of comfort with improvisation. This is perhaps due to the focus of the exercise being placed upon the students' musicianship skills rather than topics more abstract or music-theoretical in nature. Moreover, the performer interaction and communication skills that these exercises address are an essential element to learning to improvise. As such, they will be beneficial to teaching improvisation to any group of students at any level.

## The Composition Classroom or Seminar

Writers and thinkers on the psychology of music generally agree that the basic generative processes involved in improvisation and composition are linked.<sup>17</sup> As such, logic tells us that the studies of improvisation and composition are mutually beneficial. While studying composition traditionally involves precisely notating entire scores from an imagined or internalized vantage point before the work is handed over for performance, improvisation allows students real-time experience with the manipulation of musical materials, concepts, and ideas in the course of performance. Group improvisation also offers students collaborative musical experiences in which they must creatively interact and learn from each other.

Begin working with students as before by leading them through the model activity and the exercises above in order to develop a level of comfort and expressive facility with them. Throughout your work with the student composers, encourage them to play an increasingly active role in shaping the predetermined directives of each performance. These may be as simple as prescribing a specific key and meter to an improvised round or as detailed as giving a particular tone row to improvise on with particular articulations or performance techniques (*legato*, *sul ponticello*, inside the piano, etc.) within a specified tempo and overall dynamic contour. Encourage students to be creative and assist them in thinking of things that might help move the exercises in more fertile directions. If certain performance directives seem to be above the technical abilities of the students (for example,

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<sup>17</sup> John A. Sloboda, *The Musical Mind*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 138-151. Jeff Pressing, "Psychological Constraints on Improvisational Expertise and Communication." In *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettle with Melinda Russell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Scott Spiegelberg, "A Cognition-Based Pedagogy of Improvisation for Post-Secondary Education." *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, 13 no. 1 (2008), 76-83.

working with tone rows), send them home with practice materials that will help develop their abilities and revisit the exercise during the next session. Discuss with them how each performance was impacted by the given guidelines. Do the students prefer improvising to more determined performance schemes or do they prefer their improvisations to be more loosely predetermined? What kinds of background information do students find easiest to navigate within or most inspiring?

When the students feel more comfortable with these exercises and improvisation in general, have them begin to compose larger scale improvisatory works for the class to perform. These should consist of multiple sections of differing musical features. Examples include: improvised solos, duets, or textures; pre-composed melodies, harmonic changes or accompaniments; changes in rhythm, dynamic, and instrumentation; and differences in the relative amount of improvisatory freedom that each section allows. Included in the attached CD is an example of a similar composition written and performed by students for their final project in a semester-long class on improvisation that I taught while a graduate student instructor at Duke University. Appendix C gives an analysis of the features of the composition and its performance. Prior to this class, these students had little to no experience with improvisation. The quality of this performance is proof of a novice's capacity to gain the necessary confidence and ability to improvise.

These exercises ask the students to envision a possible musical outcome, communicate it to their fellow students, create the desired result through improvisation, and evaluate each outcome. While this parallels traditional compositional procedures in many ways, the immediacy of the process offers a distinct advantage over using the score as the main conveyance of compositional intention. Therefore, in addition to helping with aural

skills, musicianship skills, and the transmission of musical ideas on one's instrument, improvisation in this context can be seen to also serve as a workshop for compositional ideas. Moreover, compositional skills are being exercised in both the beforehand creation of each piece as well as in the course of performance as students improvise.

### Conclusion

By focusing on various common classroom settings, this approach is offered as a means to introduce improvisation to all students of music regardless of their musical background or chosen field of study. This is intended to help bridge the gap between the guidelines set for improvisation by the NASM and the challenges that exist in achieving them. It does not set out to develop students into perfunctory improvisers in any particular musical tradition. Instead, exercises remain open-ended in a way that allows the exploration of a wide array of musical influences stemming from both the explicit directives of each activity and the creativity of the students.

The model exercise presented above is intended to be both accessible to students and facilitators alike and highly malleable and expandable in form. Its main objective is to help students develop a comfort level with improvisation. The activities outlined in the preceding three sections are examples of how it can be directed towards topics appropriate for a variety of classroom settings. The types and amounts of pre-determined features and performance directions that govern each modification serve to focus it on particular teaching goals.

Special attention has been given throughout to aid facilitators who may be unfamiliar with improvisation but are interested and/or mandated to teach it. The primary

role of the facilitator in this approach is to guide students through improvisatory activities designed to cater to the needs of the class. Regardless of their level of experience, classroom improvisation should flourish if facilitators are capable of serving as educated and sensitive listeners, leading their class through productive discussions, being creative and prudent in activity design as fits the comfort level and facility of the students, and maintaining a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to operate outside of their comfort zones. It is my hope that this approach will help to inspire teachers throughout the discipline to incorporate improvisation into their teaching and help lead to a time where such introductory methodologies at the college level are unnecessary and obsolete.

## Appendix A – NASM Advisory on the Standards for Composition and Improvisation.

Available online at:

[http://nasm.artsaccredit.org/site/docs/NASM%20Faculty%20Advisories%5EStandards/Advisory-Composition\\_Improvisation.pdf](http://nasm.artsaccredit.org/site/docs/NASM%20Faculty%20Advisories%5EStandards/Advisory-Composition_Improvisation.pdf)

National Association of Schools of Music

### **An Advisory for Music Faculty and Administrators: NASM Standards – Composition and Improvisation**

The *NASM Handbook* contains the following standard for all professional undergraduate degrees in music—all degrees carrying the title Bachelor of Music, and all undergraduate degrees concerned with teacher preparation that lead to certification as a specialist music teacher, either as part of the baccalaureate degree, or immediately after in a master's program.

*NASM Handbook 2007-2008*, Section VIII.B.3.:

#### **3. Composition and Improvisation**

Students must acquire rudimentary capacity to create derivative or original music both extemporaneously and in written form: for example, the imitation of various musical styles, improvisation on pre-existing materials, the creation of original compositions, experimentation with various sound sources, and manipulating the common elements in non-traditional ways.

This advisory addresses issues beyond those considered in the document entitled *Notes for Music Faculty and Administrators: Standards for Composition/Improvisation, Repertory/History, and Technology in Undergraduate Professional Degrees in Music* (December 1999; Rev. September 2007). This Advisory and the *Notes* can be read in conjunction with or separate from each other.

#### **Creative Goal**

A major purpose of this standard is to encourage the development of rudimentary skill and greater insight into creative and communicative processes of music through the formulation of musical ideas in purely musical terms. While gaining fundamental technical proficiency in composition and improvisation is important to reaching this goal, the primary intent of the standard is to help all musicians gain technical means to reach individual creative ends.

#### **Levels**

Musicians live with the driving ambition to reach the highest standards in all their endeavors. But it is usually impossible to apply such ambition to every facet of the curriculum for undergraduates who must devote considerable time and energy to an area of specialization. Thus, the standard does not require students in all professional undergraduate degree programs to become highly proficient in either composition or improvisation. The goal is to provide knowledge and skills in composition and improvisation at a *rudimentary* level, both in terms of (1) gaining a better understanding of how music works and (2) using this understanding to fulfill the highest aspirations for work in the area of specialization. Higher levels of composition or improvisation are required for majors in specific specializations as specified in NASM standards. It is the prerogative of institutions to require higher levels of composition or improvisation for all students or students in certain majors.

*(continued)*

### Multiple Approaches

NASM does not promote a particular approach to this composition and improvisation standard. It does not require or even suggest that a separate class be offered. Many institutions are developing these basic competencies in theory and analysis courses; others, through class piano; still others, in assignments associated with the area of specialization. Some institutions use music education courses as the vehicle, and so on through the whole spectrum of solutions that one would expect from a highly creative group of people and institutions engaged in a highly creative field. There are also the multiple connections between improvisation and the musical practices of various cultures. The Association takes no position about the time frame for developing these competencies, nor about genres that may be used as a basis for study. Improvisation does not mandate jazz. Composition does not mandate classical. In the standard, both words are free agents. Each institution chooses its own content, approach, time frame, and evaluation methods.

### Long-Term Effort

As composition and improvisation standards have evolved, there continues to be general agreement that building this competency both in students and in the work of music units represents a long-term effort worth undertaking for the good of the field. The Association understands that instant change on a matter of this kind is not possible, that the pace of change and improvement will vary from music unit to music unit, and that there will be much experimentation both within and among institutions. However, it is equally understood that if, over time, all institutions work to address the standard and thus build composition and improvisation competencies in their students, the capacities of all graduates will be enlarged for service to the field, its patrons, and its future students. It is important to note in this context that the music portion of the *National Voluntary K-12 Standards for Arts Education* includes composition and improvisation. The music teaching community as a whole seems to be in common accord on the importance of this competence to musical understanding and development. Each NASM institution is encouraged to develop a long-range approach, perhaps developing a set of staged aspirations for defining *rudimentary* and *basic* in terms of expected achievements for its graduates.

### Approaching the Standard

As is the case with all NASM standards, the goal is to focus on the development of student capabilities, not to set bureaucratic requirements for the operation of music units. Since accreditation is based in large part on the mission, goals, and objectives developed by each institution, perhaps the best place to start is by determining present goals and objectives for student competence in composition and improvisation—in other words, starting with the *what* and the *why* before proceeding to the *how*. Often, when *what* and *why* questions are answered thoroughly, the *how* questions answer themselves.

**Music units with further concerns about the intent of these standards are invited to contact the NASM National Office staff at:**

**Telephone: (703) 437-0700  
Facsimile: (703) 437-6312  
E-mail: [info@arts-accredit.org](mailto:info@arts-accredit.org)**

## **Appendix B – Improvised Call and Response Exercises Based on Recorded Examples of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Modernist Compositions**

The first four tracks of the CD that accompanies this paper consist of students' improvised responses and actual recordings of pieces by Arnold Schoenberg and György Ligeti. The actual recordings of both pieces precede each improvised response. This exercise was given as a part of an elective course that I developed and taught while I was a graduate student at Duke University. None of these students had been previously exposed to much if any 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist music.

The thirteen students in the class were divided into three ensembles approximating the instrumentation of the pieces selected. A response to the beginning minute of Morton Feldman's *For Phillip Guston* was performed but not recorded. The students were given little background to the composers or their music before each response was performed. Recordings of each piece were played for the class prior to an initial improvised response by each ensemble. This response was prefaced by a short discussion in which the students described the music heard. This was followed by asking the students to improvise music that reflected each recording. After each initial improvised response, the classroom listened to the recordings again and discussed how each ensemble might better capture the sound and feel of each piece in a subsequent improvised response. The recordings of the class responses on the CD are these second improvised responses. In the case of the Ligeti (and the Feldman), the pitch collections used in the opening of each piece were identified prior to the improvised responses.

While the students were not taught specifics of the compositional processes involved in each piece, the recordings clearly demonstrate that an understanding and

appreciation of the pieces and their general aesthetics was reached through improvisatory means. Furthermore, the nature of the exercise made this music fun for the students. This led them to embrace and interact with modern music in a way that I had never before seen.

**CD Track Listings:**

**Track 1 – Arnold Schoenberg “Der Mondfleck” No. 18 from *Pierre Lunaire***

**Track 2 – Second Improvised Response to Schoenberg Example**

**Track 3 – György Ligeti “Corrente” No. 1 from *Chamber Concerto***

**Track 4 – Second Improvised Response to Ligeti Example**

## **Appendix C – Analysis of a Classroom Performance by Student Improvisers**

The fifth track of the included CD features a performance by a trio of student musicians enrolled in the previously mentioned course that I designed and taught at Duke university. For their final project, the twelve students in the class were divided into four trios of varying instrumentation. Each trio was assigned to collectively compose a multi-sectional piece featuring both pre-composed and improvised materials. The students were free to incorporate any stylistic influences into their work or to draw or from any of the classroom activities previously studied. Each performance was required to contain at least three sections that differed in how their pre-composed and improvised elements were designed and functioned. The assignment was designed both to showcase the students as improvisers as well as to demonstrate their understanding of how improvisation could be incorporated into a performance with various forms of background information featuring different levels of improvisatory freedom.

The following analysis is given in timeline form and attempts to show the different improvised and pre-composed features of the performance as well as minor anecdotal information that informed the composition. This particular performance was chosen for analysis due to the “all-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach that the students brought to their composition. The composition itself was written to feature many of the exercises and activities that I had the students participate in throughout the course.

◆ **Section 1 – Pulsing Melodies with Cyclic Harmony.**

This section prominently features a pulsing high C octave in the piano which the students incorporated into their composition as a clear reference to Terry Riley’s “In C” – a piece that the class studied early in the semester when we began working with exercises similar in design to the model exercise. The pulsing octaves serve as the predetermined opening to the performance and as a motive throughout that is incorporated into melodies improvised by the pianist. The design of this section features a pre-composed cyclical harmonic progression that serves as the main point of reference for the musicians as they improvise together. This type of design proved to be the most comfortable for the students perhaps because of its similarity to popular music forms.

- (00:00-00:05) – The piano begins the performance with octave high Cs pulsing at approximately 204 bpm.
- (00:05-00:15) – The drum enters in rhythm with the piano delineating pulsed Cs into common time with quarter note equal to approximately 102 bpm.
- (00:15-00:33) – The violin and the piano’s left hand enter together establishing a melody and harmonic progression accompanied by the drum and the piano’s pulsing high Cs. The violin’s melody was most likely loosely pre-composed during the composition process. Harmonic changes occur every two bars as follows: C Major– a minor – e minor– G Major.
- (0:33-01:07) – The harmonic cycle and drum rhythm continue with the harmony delineated by the piano’s left hand. The violin begins improvising melodically while the piano’s right hand octaves begin to interact melodically while keeping the pulsing Cs as a prevalent motive.
- (01:07-01:15) – The violin and piano exit for a brief drum break with slight variation from the established rhythmic pattern.
- (01:15-01:33) – The piano and violin re-enter for one more cycle. Piano’s right hand octave improvisation moves to the foreground over the violin while building upon the pulsating motive throughout.
- (01:33-01:55) – The drum drops out of the texture and the rhythm becomes less driving. The piano octaves are in the foreground while the violin improvises a countermelody. The harmonic cycle is slightly varied in this section. The piano’s repeated octave motive is still present but now in quarter-note instead of eighth-note pulses. The rhythm begins

to slow as the piano's octaves descend to transition to the next section. The drummer moves to acoustic bass guitar during this time.

### ◆ Section 2 – Group Improvisation on Bass Motive

This section features a pre-composed motive that is first introduced by the bassist and serves as its main building block for improvisation. This motive is varied and built upon by the students as it is tossed around the ensemble in call and response fashion. The tonality of this section remains for the most part fixed on the original pitches of the motive except for a brief deviation from the pianist. The fact that the ensemble did not follow the pianist's impetus here became a talking point in the discussion that followed. I pointed out that it takes a great deal of technical ability to hear and respond to what other musicians are doing around you while improvising and challenged the students to further develop their capabilities with this.

- (01:55-02:15) – The bass enters on low D as the piano arrives in pseudo-deceptive motion on a d minor chord. The bass starts playing a pre-composed, lumbering motive (D-A-E-C) elaborated by improvised string bends and glissandi.
- (02:15-03:42) – The violin and piano enter playing variations of the bass's motive and establish D Aeolian as the prevailing mode for the section. The bass continues in steady rhythm with only slight variation. The violin and piano improvise and interact with each other sometimes mirroring each other's variations to the motive. The piano briefly transposes the motive to outside of the D Aeolian mode at around (03:04 – 03:08).
- (03:42-03:57) – The bass interjects rhythmically erratic repeated notes into the motive, drastically protracts the low C, and delays its resolution by whole step to D. This signals the violin to move to high harmonics on E flat and B flat – notes outside of the prevailing tonality that were a pre-determined element serving in the transition to the next section.
- (03:57-04:29) – The ensemble begins to diminuendo as the violin plays sustained harmonics and the bass motive changes to harmonics as well. The bass begins to interject string scratches and to pluck the strings behind the bridge and above the neck of the guitar as the group transitions into the next section.

### ◆ Section 3 – Free Improvisation – Atonal and Arrhythmic

The most obvious pre-composed features of this section are the violin harmonics that serve as a bridge linking it to the previous section. Apart from this, this section contains no obvious elements that serve to guide the students other than the communal understanding that it be gesturally expressive, free of harmonic and rhythmic constraints, and feature extended instrumental techniques. Free playing of this nature was incorporated into the class after a level of comfort with improvisation was established. This was done concurrently with the study of composed and improvised modernist music.

- (04:29-05:25) – The piano begins this section with a high note flourish. The violin continues to play high harmonics with slight variations while increasingly accentuating upper neighbor-tone motion between C and Bb. The bass and piano improvise and interact with each other. The bass mainly plays gestures with extended techniques while the piano plays light, atonal flourishes and incorporates some playing inside of the piano.
- (05:25-06:34) – The violin moves away from harmonics and starts playing glissandi as the bass moves to a low, rumbling tremolo. This section becomes quite free between all three players and features improvised chorale-like figures and flourishes by the piano answered by flourishes and glissandi in the violin.

### ◆ Section 4 – Piano Ballad with Cyclic Harmony

As in the beginning, the main governing feature of this section is a cyclical harmonic progression. The dominance of the piano in this section tends to overshadow the violin. In the discussion that followed, I asked the players which player this section was supposed to feature and pointed out that it seemed unclear. After more discussion by the students, I made the suggestion that it might have been an appropriate time to let one of the players have a solo moment.

- (06:34-08:51) – Cued by the violin's seemingly out of context C major motive at the beginning of this section, the ensemble slowly transitions out of free playing into a ballad in C Major lead by the piano. This transition is roughly executed with a pre-composed harmonic cycle (C Major – G Major – a minor - F Major) slowly emerging as the players

struggle to find their way to it. The harmonic cycle here seems to be the driving force behind this section with the bass and piano's left hand outlining the chords while the violin and piano's right hand improvise melodies over them. The section comes to a close as the piano moves away from an A minor chord to a held Bb Major chord - again in pseudo-deceptive motion.

#### ◆ **Section 5 – Blues Jam in D Minor**

This section is based entirely upon a bass riff within static harmony. Unlike the previous section, soloists in this section are clearly defined and each player gets to take a turn. I made sure to use this as a positive counterexample to my critique of the previous section.

- (08:51-09:14) – A bluesy bassline in d minor abruptly begins that serves as the pre-composed basis for this section. The violin enters shortly after with a simple melodic motive punctuated by piano chords.
- (09:00-10:30) – The piano begins an improvised solo filled with blues clichés while the harmony remains static. The violin plays simple accompanying figures in the background.
- (10:30-11:20) – The piano fades into the background and begins to accompany the violin as it takes a turn soloing.
- (11:20-11:50) – The bass abruptly comes to the foreground in a display of slapping and popping still in D minor with similar punctuations as before in the piano. The end of the section is signaled by the bass landing on Eb briefly before beginning to hammer out the tonic D signaling the others to begin the next section.

#### ◆ **Section 6 – Ending Gesture and Back to the Beginning**

This section references an exercise that I developed for the class to explore polyrhythm within a loosely composed, accelerating gesture. As the ensemble reaches the end of the gesture in this performance, however, the violin and bass abruptly drop out of the texture to expose the pulsing high octave Cs that it began with. This required a high level of communication within the ensemble and was nearly perfectly executed.

- (11:50-12:24) – The repeated Ds in the bass are joined by violin double-stops and piano chords forming a 3:2 polyrhythmic relationship. After the polyrhythm is

firmly established, the players begin an *accelerando* and *crescendo* while the violin and the piano's right hand gradually ascend until the piano reaches octave high Cs.

- (12:24-12:26) – The bass and violin exit the texture exposing the pulsing high octave Cs in the piano that began the entire performance.
- (12:26-12:38) The violin and piano re-enter and quickly build to a wall-of-sound type flourish that ends the performance.