

## Training Four Skills for Improvisation

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### Introduction

*Why do We Care*

Separating the art of improvisation into its component skillsets can make teaching and learning less intimidating, more focused, and more effective.

*Questions to Consider*

- What are we teaching when we teach improvisation?
- Can improvisation be taught in a linear manner?
- Which skillsets does traditional music education emphasize?
- Which skillsets are easier/harder to teach? To measure?

*When an Exercise is Mastered, try it:*

- Faster
- In a harder key/over a harder progression
- More complex

*Reinterpret "I Can't" as "I Need More Specifics"*

*Covering All Skillsets*

- Transposing

### Training Each Skill

#### 1) *The Heart*

- A) Before: Have your student brainstorm musical elements like pitch, volume, articulation/note length, etc.

Activity: Set a timer for 45 seconds and have your student improvise while moving gradually from one extreme of the element to another. For example, they might start on their lowest pitch and move to their highest.

Next Steps:

Change two musical elements at once during the improvisation.

Instead of a 45-second timer, have students explore their element over a musical form (blues?).

- B) Before: Give the student three notes and ask them how many ways they can play those notes on the piano.

Activity: Brainstorm emotions like "sad," "energetic," and "sleepy." Have the student improvise, trying to express their emotion using all effects on those three notes.

Next Steps: Give the student chords that will work with the melody notes and see if they can mix them in a way that will express the emotion.

Try the same exercise using an entire major or minor scale.

## 2) *The Ear*

- A) Before: Teach your student the first four notes of the blues scale orally and on the piano.

Activity: For each of the three phrases of the blues scale, direct students to:

- a) Hear a blues-based melody in their head
- b) Sing that melody
- c) Play the melody on the piano (as best they can)

Next Steps: Teach the students the top three notes of the blues scale and have them improvise in a similar fashion.

Remove the middle step – have them hear a melody and then play it directly afterwards (without singing).

Try with two-measure phrases.

- B) Before: Go over a basic progression (blues, V-I) with your student. Have them learn to sing the bass and arpeggios.

Activity: Have the student start by singing a note of the chord. As you play each chord on the piano, have the student find an adjacent (step-wise) chord tone in the new chord.

Next Steps: Have the student sing the note before you play the next chord (so they must hear in advance where the harmony is going).

Have the student do the same exercise at their instrument.

Allow the student to leap, while making sure that they are singing a chord tone.

## 3) *The Brain*

- A) Before: Stand up facing your student and practice tapping two-measure rhythms while marching in time.

Activity: Direct them to use the end of your phrase as the beginning of their phrase, then improvise their own phrase ending.

Next Steps: Increase the rhythms to four measures long.

Have the students tap/clap/stomp/etc. any part of their body they like. The next student must imitate faithfully.

Do the same thing using limited notes (just one note? An arpeggio?) on the piano.

- B) Before: Teach your student how to find the correct 3<sup>rd</sup> of a chord.

Activity: Play through a set of chord changes (the blues?) in time and have them hit the third on the downbeat. Then, have them play a half-step lead in, then two half-step lead-ins, etc.

Next Steps: Aim for other chord tones, like the fifth or seventh (in a jazz context).

Experiment with adding half-step lead-ins from above and below; try the “chromatic enclosure.”

Use whole step lead-ins instead.

## 4) *Muscle Memory*

- A) Before: Divide a known scale (C major? Bb major?) into intervals – 3rds, 4ths, etc. and triads.

Activity: Give your student a simple one-measure rhythm and instruct them to move freely within the scale but stick to the given rhythm. Encourage large jumps and skips.

Next Steps: Improvise over longer rhythms (2 measures, 4 measures).

Improvise using changing scales (i.e. one measure of Bb major then one measure of Eb major).

Try improvising in constant eighth notes.

B) Before: On a single chord, teach a student the arpeggio in every inversion.

Activity: While playing some sort of a rhythmic vamp, direct the student to use rhythm and different inversions to make an interesting improvisation using only the arpeggio.

Next Steps: Have the student add some of the half-step lead-ins they practiced their “Brain” exercise.

Add skips and repeated notes within the arpeggios.

Play arpeggios similarly but over a chord progression (the blues?).

## **Conclusion**

### *How We Teach*

- Which skills are incorporated into our students’ lessons and practice sessions?
- Which skills are addressed first? What might not be addressed daily?
- Do students do a good job practicing/addressing their weaknesses?

### *Action Steps*

- Have your students self-assess their strengths/ weaknesses
- Examine what skills students are/aren’t addressing in their lessons and practice sessions
- Communicate the value of skillsets that are less easily measurable
- Incorporate the missing elements into lessons and curricula