



JUST PLAY!

Teaching Beginning Improvisation Through Experimentation and Discovery

ABOUT ME

- Teaching Experience
 - Instructor of Jazz Studies - University of Oregon
 - Director of Bands & Jazz Studies - Lane Community College
 - Assistant Director of Bands at Washington HS, Sioux Falls, SD
- Education
 - Masters in Music (Jazz Studies) from University of Oregon
 - Bachelors in Music Education from University of Nebraska

WHO IS THIS FOR?

- Educators looking to encourage students who have little or no prior experience with improvisation and transcription, or who are shy and afraid of failing in front of their peers

WHY THIS TOPIC?

- Too many students fail to explore improvisation because of fear
 - Children (as they grow older) are socialized to fear and avoid failure, rather than to embrace it as part of the learning process
 - There is a myth that students who are good improvisers or who have good ears are born that way - and that those skills are god-given, rather than earned

OUTCOMES OF THIS PRESENTATION

- Hopefully - you will walk away from this presentation with:
 - Strategies for preparing students to improvise or transcribe
 - Strategies for creating low-pressure environments where students are free to “play” around with music - where they can experiment and discover
 - Several “warm-ups” and lessons to use with your groups
 - A list of suggested repertoire and recordings

PREPARING THE STUDENT

- The traditional method of preparation is scale-based
 - Common problems
 - We don't practice enough repetitions or variations before asking students to improvise
 - We forget to teach how scales can be used to create phrases
 - We choose repertoire that is overwhelming because it demands too many different scales

PREPARING THE STUDENT

- Alternatives to scale-based preparation
 - Melody/Solo Transcription
 - leading to Embellishment
 - Composition
 - leading to Improvisation

MELODY/SOLO TRANSCRIPTION

- History/Background
 - Early New Orleans jazz clarinetist Alphonse Picou (1878 - 1961) spoke of one of his earliest experiences playing jazz/ragtime
 - From “Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya” by Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro, Dover Books.

MELODY/SOLO “TRANSCRIPTION”

1. Choose a recording

- Easier melodies may include:
 - Slower tempo or lower rhythmic density
 - Pentatonic or blues scales
 - Repetition
 - Little or no embellishment by the performer
- Create loops of the recording to use with the student
 - Apps like “AnyTune” can do this easily on your phone

REPERTOIRE/RECORDINGS FOR GROUP TRANSCRIPTION

EASY:

- Oriental Folk Song (from *Night Dreamer* by Wayne Shorter)
- Bags' Groove (from *Bags' Groove* by Miles Davis)
- Sonnymoon for Two (from *A Night at the Village Vanguard* by Sonny Rollins)
- Trane's Slo Blues (from *Lush Life* by John Coltrane)
- Chitlins con Carne (from *Midnight Blue* by Kenny Burrell)
- Dig Dis (from *Soul Station* by Hank Mobley)

REPERTOIRE/RECORDINGS FOR GROUP TRANSCRIPTION

MEDIUM-EASY:

- Equinox (from *Coltrane's Sound* by John Coltrane)
 - (easy - but in Db minor - good for moving students to unfamiliar keys)
- Watermelon Man (from *Takin' Off* by Herbie Hancock)
- Hobo Joe (from *Little Johnny C* by Johnny Coles)
- Blue Friday (from *Quiet Kenny* by Kenny Dorham)
- Armageddon (from *Night Dreamer* by Wayne Shorter)

REPERTOIRE/RECORDINGS FOR GROUP TRANSCRIPTION

HARDER (not blues, but mostly diatonic):

- There Will Never Be Another You (from *Solid* by Woody Shaw)
- Satin Doll (from *A Touch of Satin* by J.J. Johnson)
- A Foggy Day (from *Here 'Tis* by Lou Donaldson)
- Bye Bye Blackbird (from *Gingerbread* by Clark Terry and Bob Brookmeyer)

MELODY/SOLO “TRANSCRIPTION”

2. Incorporate the recording into your students' daily routine

- I recommend looping the melody at the beginning of rehearsal - when students are still walking into the classroom, getting their instruments out, etc.
- Have students sing along (or hum, or whistle)
 - Drummers should sing too! Either the melody, or the drum part.

MELODY/SOLO

“TRANSCRIPTION”

3. Have the students begin playing along on their instrument.

- This should be as low-pressure as possible.
 - Encourage “fiddling,” as students fish for notes.
 - Leave some “bread crumbs” for students struggling - write the starting pitch on the board, or a menu of different pitches to choose from...
- Drummers can do body percussion (playing along on their set might be too noisy)

MELODY/SOLO “TRANSCRIPTION”

4. Continue expanding the loop and learning more of the recording

- Never write it down!
- With students who are excited and/or preparing to improvise in your ensemble literature, begin encouraging them to repeat this process using recordings of the repertoire you're studying

5. Once students can play (and I mean PLAY) the transcription from memory, begin encouraging improvisation by embellishment

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

History/Background

- Early New Orleans jazz clarinetist Alphonse Picou (1878 - 1961) spoke of one of his earliest experiences playing jazz/ragtime
 - From “Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya” by Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro, Dover Books.

“As a boy, the first jazz I heard was a jazz band at the corner of St. Phillips and Claiborne. It was called the Excelsior Band. The only musician I remember from that band was Fine Quiyrit, the trumpet player. It was a long time ago.

Was it ragtime? No, no, it was nothing but marches they was playing - brass marches - parade music...”

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

“So I was invited down to a rehearsal that night and I went to the place and I said to him, ‘What do you want me to do?’ I said, ‘Do you want me to play my instrument? Is there any music?’ He said, ‘Music? You don’t need none.’ I said, ‘How am I going to play?’ He said, “You’re going to come in on the choruses.’ I said, ‘All right,’ and then I tuned up...

That particular style of playing without music was very new to me. I think it was impossible to me!...

I remember when we got a new piece of music we would get the music and play the tunes with the music, then, after that we didn’t need that music no more. We’d go ‘out of the way’ with it. That was ragtime.”

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

Another early jazz musician, Bunk Johnson, said the following about Buddy Bolden, the first standout jazz soloist (who was never recorded):

“Now here is the thing that made King Bolden’s Band the first band to play jazz. It was because they could not read at all...

I liked to read, but I played that head music better - more jazz to it. I liked to read, and I could read good, but Bolden played pretty much by ear. And made up his own tunes; but everything that he played, I could whistle, I could play.”

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

1. Learn a melody (*by ear - do not write it down*)
2. Learn more than just the notes/rhythm - learn the style, phrasing, articulation pattern, accent scheme, everything that makes it sound *GREAT*
3. Play it over and over and over again - internalize it
 - Don't embellish too soon - students must really internalize the material before they will have much success modifying it

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

4. Some students may jump right in and have success, but others will struggle. They need limitations so they may continue to internalize the melody and focus on one thing at a time.
 - Early limitations:
 - The only “embellishment” you get to make is to *not* play
 - Choose one note of each phrase - allow them to change that note to a different

MELODIC EMBELLISHMENT

5. Teach embellishment through motivic development

- By “playing around” with the first two notes of Bags’ Groove, we can teach:
 - Rhythmic Displacement (move it)
 - Rhythmic Augmentation (stretch it)
 - Rhythmic Diminution (shorten it)
 - Inversion (flip it)
 - Retrograde (play it backwards)
 - Intervallic Aug/Dim (make the interval wider/smaller)
 - etc.

Example: Thelonious Monk’s solo on “Bags’ Groove” from Miles Davis’ album *Bags’ Groove*

COMPOSITION

- Another way of reducing pressure on new improvisers is by allowing them to slow down the creative process and to compose a “solo”
- Setting a text (such as a poem) gives this project rhythmic & phrasing structure - and some creative inspiration!
 - Students can then either use pitches out of a scale, or from a “menu” that you create for them
- Example: [John Coltrane's “Psalm” from A Love Supreme](#)

COMPOSITION (TEXT-SETTING)

- Example assignment:
 - Give students their “pitch menu” or scale, a drone, and a text
 - Ask them to record their piece
 - (For these assignments - notation is ok - allow students to structure their tone poem just as they desire)
 - (May be in or out of time - up to the student)
 - Provide an opportunity for students to perform their piece for the class

IMPROVISATION (TEXT-SETTING)

- **Example lesson #2 (with the full group)**
 - **You are the text narrator**
 - **Establish a drone (from recording - or using musicians in the group)**
 - **Narrate a line of the poem - students should improvise a melody back using that rhythm/phrasing**
 - **(This is group improvisation - no one is soloing or isolated - be accepting of some “chaos” to allow students cover to practice and experiment)**

IMPROVISATION (TEXT-SETTING)

- **Example lesson #3 (with soloists)**
 - **A student is the text narrator**
 - **Establish a drone (from recording - or using musicians in the group/audience)**
 - **The narrator will read one line of the poem at a time - after each phrase, the soloist should improvise a melody back using that rhythm/phrasing**
 - **(This is a chance to feature individual soloists after they've had a chance to compose and practice in a group setting)**

IMPROVISATION (TEXT-SETTING)

- Example lesson #4 (with soloists)
 - Establish a drone (from recording - or using musicians in the group/audience)
 - Remove the narrator - the improviser's job is now to narrate the poem in their head as they are playing
 - (This connects the soloist's instrument to their inner voice)

WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS by Shel Silverstein

There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind

WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS by Shel Silverstein

Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street winds and bends.
Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
To the place where the sidewalk ends.

WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS by Shel Silverstein

Yes we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go,
For the children, they mark, and the children, they know
The place where the sidewalk ends.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Everybody who has become a strong improviser spent a fair amount of time being a bad improviser - even in front of people!
- Don't fear failure - embrace it as an opportunity to learn and grow.

More ideas like these are available in Steve Treseler's (free) ebook, "Creativity Triggers for Musicians."

QUESTIONS?

Contact me!

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Session PDF available for download at:

www.paulkruegermusic.com