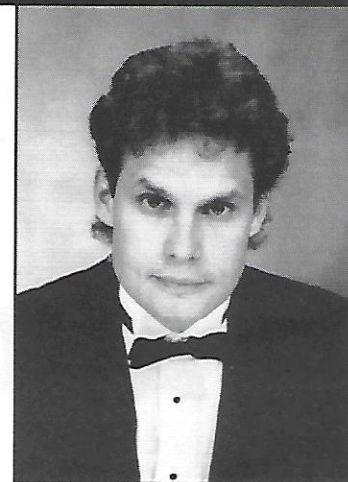


## Exploration of Improvisation

by Anthony Susi

I had the good fortune and pleasure the past three years of designing and teaching courses in music composition and jazz improvisation to students (grs. 5-8) enrolled in the Excursions & Learning Summer Program. The following are activities I adapted from articles published in MEJ that I would recommend as a "prequel" to the formalized composition worksheets I presented last year. They are designed to evoke musical creativity without the theoretical hinderance of standard notation. Their primary purpose is to get each student to "think" like a professional composer; becoming more aware of the many aspects to consider through creative investigation.



**PART 1: EXPLORATION** – (Experimentation with different sounds/timbres; interaction with classmates and various instruments.)

- 1) **Oral Improvisation to Descriptive Adjectives** ("SOUNDS IN ACTION") – Have students echo combinations from the teacher of consonant sounds: high, low, fast, slow. Generate interesting and varied sounds from the children with the following type of statements: a.) Make any sound at all. b.) Make it ugly/beautiful. c.) Make it cry/laugh. d.) Make it walk/run. e.) Make it timid/bold.
- 2) **Name Improvisation** ("TONGUE TANGLE") – Explore the consonants of a student's name. Ask the class to identify if there are explosive consonants, consonant blends, or consonants that can be prolonged. Examine the vowel sounds together. Are they singular or vowel blends? Discuss devices/techniques to be utilized: Rests, Repetition, Pitch, Dynamics, Inversion, Layering, Drone/Ostinato. Suggestions:
  - a.) Interrupt a prolonged vowel with bits of silence.
  - b.) Invent patterns of repeated consonants.
  - c.) Make vowel blends change pitch and dynamics.

- d.) Create a contrasting section by using your middle or last name.
- e.) Combine students names simultaneously, staggered and/or in succession to form a larger class composition.

- 3) **Oral Improvisation to Motions** ("MOTION MADNESS") – Stand in a circle, and using your body, pass a motion to the next person as each person makes a sound to accompany it. Evaluate where the variety of movements and accompanying sounds was most interesting. Variations :
  - a.) A leader in the middle can create a variety of silent movements (using qualities of high, low, fast, slow, sustained) while the group accompanies with vocal or instrumental sounds.
  - b.) Two leaders in the center can move with a divided circle accompanying their motions with sound. Remind the students that there is silence within music, so they must occasionally be motionless. The two leaders should attempt to both complement and contrast each other's movements.
  - c.) Assign specific movements and accompanying instruments to various students, i.e.; Sustained movement with accompanying windchimes; explosive, expansive movements accompanied by cymbal, angular movements accompanied by wooden instruments.
- 4) **Body Percussion** ("BODY BUSTER") – Snap, Clap, Tap & Stomp!
  - a. **Imitation/Echo** – Using only the body to generate sounds, the students try to imitate the rhythm patterns performed by the teacher ( first 4 and then 8 beats ). Variation 1: Allow students to take turns making up their patterns for the

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class to echo. Start with one sound on each beat and restrict to quarter and eighth note values for the patterns. Variation 2: Using their instruments, challenge students to dissect the original motive into pitch and rhythm. Can they keep the rhythm while making up their own pitches? Can they keep the same shape while changing the rhythm?

- b. **Call & Response** – Invite students to improvise their own rhythm patterns in response to the teacher rather than imitating exactly what they hear. When students are reasonably comfortable, try this exercise in a round robin (teacher performs a phrase which the first student must answer. That student then performs a new phrase which the next student tries to answer, and so on). Limit to an 8 beat phrase without missing a beat between players. For an advanced version, ask the students to create an eight-beat ostinato with body percussion, and use this instead of counting out loud. Variation: The students continue question & answer improvisations in small groups, assigning two timbres of their choice to the call & response players.

\* At some point in the improvisatory process, each student needs to improvise a two measure phrase and then be able to immediately repeat it. This will start developing their tonal memory and ability to form cohesive phrases.

- 5) **Ensemble Improvisation** ("TALKING DRUMS") – Everyone in each group tries to maintain a steady beat together on their instrument except for the improviser. He/she improvises a 4 beat pattern, then keeps a steady beat for the next performer's improvisation.

- a. **Ostinatos** – Split the class up into small groups. Each student must contribute a rhythm pattern from which the group creates a percussion composition. Have specific guidelines, i.e.; use at least one metal and one wooden sound in the composition, include an introduction, incorporate a crescendo and diminuendo.

- 6) **Free Melodic/Harmonic Improvisation with Partner** ("MIXED MELODIES")

\* Request the class to try the following harmonic exercises with their eyes closed. This eliminates visual distractions and helps them to listen more intently.

- a. **Simultaneously** – On a slow half note pulse, (MM=40) two players randomly sound single tones together, one tone for each half note. Each player chooses the next tone in response to the previous two-tone sound. The choice of tones should not be restricted to a particular key or mode so students can experience consonance and dissonance. Afterwards, a discussion can take place about which combination of notes sounded pleasing to their ears as an introduction to major-minor tonality.
- b. **In Succession** – For a variation of this exercise, the two players sound their tones in succession, each sustaining his or her pitch while the other speaks. This approach allows for varying tempos and durations. Ask the class to identify if any patterns emerged in the process.
- c. **Duple vs. Triple** – Another version of this plan is based on experimentation with duple or triple meter. If 3/4 time is designated, then each partner's turn would consist of improvising three single-tone beats followed by a dotted half. The second player would begin improvising his or her three beats while the first is sustaining his/her dotted half note. In 4/4, one player sounds his/her four quarter notes while the other holds the whole note.
- d. **Antiphonally on a Keyboard** ("KEYBOARD SAFARI") – One player begins, using the lower half of the keyboard to improvise a melodic phrase, holding the final tone. The other player responds in the upper register with a similar or contrasting phrase, playing off the sustained tone and sustaining a final sound for the partner's next statement. Following a few alternations, the players sound their lines simultaneously, creating phrases that overlap or coincide.

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- e. **1 - 5 sounds alternatively** – Two players select a number from one to five, which will represent the number of sounds (not beats) each has per turn. A sound is one acoustical event, from one to ten tones produced simultaneously by both hands if using a keyboard.
  - f. **Scale Drills** – Have each instrumentalist or vocalist start on a scale tone, improvise a phrase that uses the scale tones only, and return to the initial tone. Everyone else can sing/play the starting note, holding it like a pedal-tone. An advanced version would allow tones that do not occur in the scale and ask the students to aurally identify them.
  - g. **Pentatonic** – Choose five tones, such as C, E, G, A, D or others, which will sound harmonious when heard together. Assign each student one of these pitches to sustain. Vary the dynamics, break up the long tones with staggered rests and active rhythms, but always on the same pitch. Let this sound last long enough to create a meter-free color with texture. The result can be a stimulating “musical cloud”. Experiment with other pentatonic chord tones, such as C, Eb, G, Bb, or D for a different mood.
- 7) **Improvised Conducting (“MAESTRO”)** – After exploring the various sounds possible with unpitched percussion instrs., body sounds and their wind instr./keyboard, let each student try to direct/improvise a music work. Students should try to follow the conductor’s gestures for the style of playing and when to start and when to stop. When the improvisation is finished, ask the class to remember how the work started, who played next, what followed etc. Pick a new conductor to try and recreate the whole work. This difficult task should make it clear to students the need for a form of written symbols to communicate the composer’s ideas to the performers.

### PART 2: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVISATION/COMPOSITION

- 1) **Listening Analysis (“NAME THAT TUNE”)** – Play a recording of an instrumental composition without telling the students the title or composer. Ask individuals to share their imagery (place, time, mood, action). See how close they come to the composer’s interpretation/title. Discuss what elements the composer utilized to convey his/her intention: Tonality, Tempo, Meter, Dynamics, Rhythm, Instrumentation, Form, etc.
- 2) **Creating Tension & Release** – Listen to various recordings which illustrate elements of Tension and Release utilized by the composer; i.e.: dynamics, rhythmic activity, register, modes, tonality, choice of instruments, articulation/style, etc. Ask the class to identify these techniques with a piece such as Night on Bald Mountain.
- 3) **Musicality & Attitude Cards** – Show each performer an attitude card that asks for a phrase or motive to be altered in a certain way. Each card has an adjective or adverb written on it such as sorrowful, excited, angry, etc. Also try musicality cards with terms such as legato, staccato, crescendo, and rallantando. Secretly show an attitude/musicality card to a volunteer and ask he or she to sing/play a scale in the manner prescribed. Classmates should then describe what they heard in musical terms and see if they match the performer’s intentions.
- 4) **Variations on a Theme** – Each student is asked to sing/play a variation on a simple melody (rote song) using one or more of following parameters: tonality, duration & silence, tempo, dynamics, embellishments, articulation.

**PART 3: NOTATING MUSICAL IDEAS** – The following exercises are designed to illustrate the process of communicating rhythm & melody to other performers.

- \* At this early stage of composition, nothing should be set down in traditional notation because the students’ musical ideas would be restricted to their skill level with symbolism. Student devised notation, however, can help the students remember exactly “what and when” for purposes of rehearsal and performance.
- 1) **Convert Improvisation to Graphic Representation (“GUESS A GRAPHIC”)** – Each student creates two graphics, one for a particular wind instrument, and one for a percussion sound and rhythm pattern. Think “Pictionary”. All the graphics are then displayed together. A volunteer attempts to interpret one graphic in

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time the repeated words are read, reinforcing the concept of same/different in music. Ask them to create a rhythmic accompaniment for the entire story based on the poetic meter. An excellent listening example of the development and use of a single motive is Beethoven's 5th Symphony.

- a. **Create a Melody for Rhythmic Motives** – Assign each student an 8 beat rhythm pattern aurally to create a melody for. Put all the patterns together to create an extended melody. Choose other students to add a complimentary percussive accompaniment.
- b. **Create a Melody to Accompany a Short Poem** – (original encouraged).

### PART 4: SONG DEVELOPMENT

- 1) **Picture Painting Through Music** – Ask each student to create a short instrumental song "describing" either an animal, emotion or weather. Have each student perform their piece for the class who must try to identify which animal, emotion or type of weather they think the song represents from a display of three or four pictures. I would suggest Carnival of the Animals for a listening demonstration.
- 2) **Structured Harmony**
  - a. **Improvising over a Rhythmic Drone** – Create a melody using the pentatonic scale over ostinatos built on intervals of a 3rd & 5th (mallet instruments).
  - b. **Calypso based on I & V7** – Two students can play at each keyboard, one playing a calypso style bass line on the lower end and one playing root position chords around middle C. Where keyboards have the capability of split voices, it becomes fun and interesting to select one sound for the bass line and a different sound for the chords. Another student can create a rhythmic accompaniment (drum machine). Against this accompaniment, soloists can improvise on keyboard, mallet or wind instruments using appropriate chord tones. In the beginning stages, each soloist can be responsible for only one chord, improvising on his/her assigned chord tones at the appropriate time.
  - c. **I - IV - V7** (Same Guidelines as 2b.)

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sound from the display. The class tries to decide which one is being performed. Discuss the musical factors that contributed to the successful communication of any student(s) graphic representation. The students who were unsuccessful should reflect on and refine their notation systems.

\* When giving constructive comments, describe only in terms of specific musical elements, such as phrasing, rhythm, dynamics, harmony, & form. Do not talk about personal feelings or opinions.

- 2) **Class Devised Notation** – As a class, try to draw a sketch of the work from "Maestro" exercise #7 using pictures, diagrams, or creating collages; to show who plays, what they play, when they play and how they play. Using this score, ask each student to play it inside his or her head. The conductor gives the beats and a cue to begin. Ask students to give a sign by clapping their hands once they reach the end of the music in their head. This exercise makes students aware of the need to indicate measurements of time in their graphs.
- 3) **Motives: Repetition & Contrast ("RHYTHM OF THE WORDS")** – Read out loud a children's book or poem such as Dr. Seuss' Hand, Hand, Fingers Thumb, to experience the rhythm of the words. Several phrases (motives) repeat throughout the book. The same instrument(s) could be performed each

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- 3) **Sound Story** – Ask the students to create a series of sound pieces to accompany the ideas, events, and emotions associated with a selected piece of children's literature (such as "Where the Wild Things Are) or a student's original story. The students make a class chart of the events of the story. The students divide into groups and each group is assigned a section of the story from the class chart. The groups rehearse their portion of the composition and then perform for the class. Each group should explain to the class the musical choices they made to fit their composition to that section of the story. The students then critique each other's work and suggest refinements. This dramatization could be acted out by the students or with homemade puppets. Try telling the story using only sounds. An ideal listening demonstration would be Peter & the Wolf. Variation: Have the class watch one minute of a cartoon video without the sound on. Instruct the class to imagine what the sound track and the music could be to accompany the actions. Then replay the video, but this time have them play along. Show it once again with the original sound and compare/contrast to ideas utilized in the class' version.

- 4) **Symphony** – Begin with the group choosing a central theme, i.e. - Dinosaurs, Types of Weather, a Continent, etc. Next decide how many movements the Symphony will need and limit the length of each movement. The students select the instruments they think will help characterize each movement and/or central theme. They must also consider the tonality, tempo, meter, dynamics, articulation, etc. they feel would be reflective of the title of each movement.

I hope you experience as much success with these activities as I have enjoyed.

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