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Adelphi University course MUO 280-001 IMPROVISATION ENSEMBLE

Special note for Spring 2022 - adjustments to activities due to Covid-19

Hello students, and welcome to Improvisation Ensemble 2022. We will hopefully be meeting in person, and striving to keep each other safe by following an honor system of personal responsibility. The potential presence of a serious virus means we will be modifying many of the activities that were important parts of the class in years past: we will be masked for group singing and when playing wind instruments. We be disinfecting any shared percussion instruments and we will be hygienic about using any of the available pianos. That said, we will need to bring more to class in the way of our music-making intentions and creativity.

Despite these apparent limitations, I would like all of you to have access to the full content of this class in the way it has been presented in past years. Therefore, I have not modified the syllabus or the Moodle topics below. The full range of improvisational options are available for you to sample at-home using online formats if you choose to do so outside of class time or by appointment. Of course, we are all learning a lot about improvisation in the modifications to educational practices that have come about due to Covid-19. I am sure we will have surprises and challenges during this semester as well.

I am hoping for an eventual return to "normalcy" when our breaths will pose no unusual threats to each other, and we can resume singing, horn playing, and passing instruments around to try with only normal levels of risk. But until then, we will learn as much as we can about group collaboration, individual vulnerability, rhythm, melody and harmony in the ways that remain open to us.

While the best plans we make may be waylaid by unforeseen circumstances, we are prepared for shifts in teaching format from our experiences over the past two spring semesters. If needed, the distance

learning version of this class (emphasizing personal improvisation in place of group experiences) already exists and can be implemented quickly.

There is no substitute for experience making improvised music in live situations. Therefore, class attendance and participation has always been the most important part of this course. If you are absent due to illness from any of the class meetings or if you are subject to quarantine that keeps you off campus, you must make up the missed instructional time. For a limited number of absences, it will be possible to earn instructional time by choosing assignments from the Moodle units below. There are many exercises and videos to view, practice, or imitate. Afterwards, you can make recordings of your playing and write a reaction paper based on your experience. It will be necessary to get my approval in advance for any makeup assignments that are due to absences.

- Dr. Oshinsky

### Course Syllabus, Assignment Schedule, Grading Criteria

The Improvisation Ensemble is a class that will give you experience making spontaneous music in solo, small ensemble and large group contexts. You will also learn how to facilitate music-making for others. The driving philosophy of the class is that everyone is musical, and that creativity thrives in an atmosphere of encouragement.

In other performing ensembles, the format is different - there is a literature of available music to learn and rehearse in preparation for a final concert showcasing the genre - brass, vocal, chamber music, etc.. In this class, there is more to learn and less to rehearse.

To be ready to make spontaneous music, we each need to practice musical fluency and boldness - accessing our musical ideas and moving quickly from impulse to sound, creating tensions and releases. To make music that is connected to what our ensemble-mates are playing, we need to cultivate our listening skills to match their tempo, tonality, and emotion: rhapsodic or plaintive; delicate or intense. And to create a program of improvised music for a final concert, we need to develop a "big picture" view of how improvised musical pieces can be sequenced. Our building blocks at every level of music making will involve contrasts - from the intimacy of solos and

duets to the high energy density of pieces that involve the whole group and maybe the audience, too.

Unlike the other performing ensembles, you are not expected to already know how to improvise when you take this course. In fact, every year there are some students with little or no prior experience improvising. We will start off with activities that are welcoming and simple, and build throughout the semester into forms that are more sophisticated. You will gain the most if you take every opportunity to jump into the unknown territory of making stuff up. Your biggest challenge will likely be your own fears of making mistakes. The quicker you can accept that mistakes are part of the process, the better. Each error is also an enriching opportunity to learn something new, so long as you can analyze your work without criticizing it. One thing I can guarantee - you will not hear me criticize the music you make at any point in the whole semester. Will I call your attention to something? maybe. But not with critical intent. And the less you criticize yourself, the more free and flexible your music will become. When you discern and evaluate your performance, you can pinpoint things that worked and things that need work. But if you are overly critical, you can tear down your self-worth and question your abilities, even when you are very accomplished and skilled. There is no need to fall on that sword here.

Even though the class atmosphere will be positive and encouraging, you will still have important assignments for this class that will need to be done in a timely way. First off, I would like you to read about musicality and musicianship - how to play your own best music and play in ways that help your band-mates sound better. For this reason, I have assigned Victor Wooten's *The Music Lesson*. Wooten is a multi-Grammy winning bassist. He can play in every musical genre. And he lectures worldwide on the ways music is a language that transcends cultural boundaries. Read his book. It is a novel about how an ordinary, struggling bass player is visited by a string of supernatural characters who transform his ideas about music making. And life. Just read it, the sooner the better.

I would also like you to read about how to facilitate musical experiences for others. I will model facilitation as best I can - using simple, accessible activities, clear, well-timed verbal coaching, and integrated, rhythm centered body language that communicates enjoyment and approval. These skills are

useful in music classrooms and in concerts. Several of the people who have written in a very accessible and detailed way about facilitating group music experiences are drum circle leaders. Chief among them is Arthur Hull, who has been training drum circle facilitators for over 30 years. His book, *Drum Circle Facilitation* is written in an open and disarming style, emphasizing what he has learned through his biggest mistakes. So there is a sense of humor to it. As well as dozens of activities that work for players of all ages and ability levels. So read *Drum Circle Facilitation* even if you have never been to a drum circle. We'll fix that soon enough.

Lastly, I would like you to show up for class on time and with your instrument tuned and ready to play. We will be treating the music we make with honor and respect, entering "the temple of music" each session we meet. Let every silence be a respectful silence. Leave all snarkyness outside the door. Let's support each other, meet in the musical playground, and make great music!

#### Table of contents:

This Moodle page contains about two dozen thematic modules, each dedicated to a different aspect of improvisation. This first section is for orientation. It contains important pdf files such as the course syllabus and the schedule of assignments. Most of the key information about the class is in the syllabus, such as the attendance and absence policy, the criteria for grading, etc. The Schedule of Assignments gives you the specific deadlines for what to read, practice or view before each class. I suggest you print out these two documents for ready reference and that you post a copy of the list of assignments somewhere in your room. The syllabus also includes an annotated bibliography of a dozen books on improvisation, including the three books we will be using during the course.

The rest of the Moodle modules are dedicated to a variety of performance and education oriented topics. Some of the Moodle modules contain listening and reading assignments in the form of mp3 files or pdf files. Some have inspirational quotes or exemplary video files. Please look over all of the available Moodle material as soon as possible. Let me say that again - skim the whole Moodle page, including all twenty-something of the modules, at least briefly. Why? To customize the class to your preferences. I am open to

"taking requests." We can spend more time in class on those activities that you express a specific interest in exploring.

## Improvisation Ensemble - Class meeting dates Spring 2022 Page

All of the days when class meets:

January 26

February 2 7 9 14 16 21 23 28

March 2 7 9

March 21 23 28 30

April 4 6 11 13 18 20 25 27

May 2 4 9 (not May 11)

final concert TBD; last meeting during finals week May 16 or 18

We meet every Monday and Wednesday. Our schedule gives us 28 meetings from January 26 through May 9, with no long Spring break. We can consider the first 13 meetings (through March 9 ) as the core teaching segment for the class where you will be asked to practice personal improvisation at home, and you will experience ensemble improvisation and the facilitation of spontaneous music making in class. Anytime after the first 12 sessions you may be called on to try your hand at leading some of the activities you have participated in.

We next have a cluster of 10 sessions from March 21 to April 20. We can reserve these sessions for topics in improvisation that you express interest in pursuing once the basics have been covered.

Our four final sessions, from April 25 to May 9, will be dedicated to envisioning a final project or performance.

Our other regular class times on May 11 is preempted for a potential snow day make up.

Our last meeting is usually the final concert. This might take place during class time on May 9, or we may be given a time during finals week.

Our final concert, if the class format remains traditional in-person instruction, will be a live improvised performance of your design. Of course, we will keep an open mind about whatever shifts in format may be required for health and safety reasons.

*In the era of COVID-19, the university has applied rules for music making and instrument sharing that have varied from year to year, based on the prevailing wisdom about disease transmission and safe practices. The rules for 2021 were stricter than those in place for 2022. The paragraphs below reflect the adjustments to my instructional approach that were necessitated by the university's guidelines. If future developments required a return to more restrictive practices, we would be ready to re-implement them.*

*Special equipment purchases needed for Spring 2021 (not for Spring 2022)*

*Required personal percussion kits*

*In previous years, It was possible to safely share instruments in the Improvisation Ensemble class. This year (2021), the university's safety protocols to address the Covid-19 pandemic preclude such activities as sharing percussion instruments, and only one person per class period may use a specific piano in the classroom. As a result, each student will be required to bring to class a small percussion kit of their own. The components of the kit are:*

- 1. a hand drum, such as a small djembe or doumbek. The Remo "kids' djembe" may be the most economical choice. It is available from West Music and other sources.*
- 2. a shaker, such as a shaker egg, or other shaker of any timbre. Many are available through online websites, or you are free to construct your own.*
- 3. a rasp, such as a "frog," guiro, or other instrument of wood or metal.*
- 4. claves - wood blocks.*
- 5. a bell - ideally, an agogo bell or cowbell.*
- 6. a gong - any long-duration metal bell, from a pot lid or bundt pan to a gong type cymbal.*
- 7. strikers for the bells - these can be traditional drumsticks or mallets, or home made versions. Choose a variety of materials of different hardness, from wood sticks to felt pads to rubber balls.*
- 8. a small duffle bag or tote bag to transport the percussion instruments listed above.*

*It is expected you will have these materials with you at every class meeting.*

*In consideration of the costs of these materials, the required textbooks for the course will be limited to *The Music Lesson* by Victor Wooten. The other texts will be recommended but not required, and selected segments will be available to read or listen to online.*

*One of the core skill sets of this class, both for participating in improvisations and facilitating improvisation for others, is familiarity with the major activities and signals for leading drum circles. Under non-C19 conditions, I would bring a variety of hand percussion instruments to share, including claves/wood blocks, rasps/frogs, shakers of various timbres, bells of various pitches and durations, tambourines, frame drums, and hand drums from bass to treble registers - djembes, tubanos, ashikos, congas, bongos, etc. There is a listening skill to master that involves hearing the "holes" in a group improvised rhythm and choosing the instrumentation to best fill the hole. Since we are prohibited from sharing instruments, it will be advisable to create your own personal kit of small percussion.*

*Here are some suggested instruments from the West Music website:*

- 1. Item No. 200678 Remo Kids Percussion KD-0608-01 8" Djembe Alt. Part # KD-0608-01 UPC Code 757242111062 \$79.00*
- 2. Item No. 201128 Basic Beat BBFR4 Small Frog Rasp Alt. Part # BBFR4 UPC Code 881970500871 \$14.95*
- 3. Item No. 200461 LP ASPIRE LPA165 LARGE WHITE WOOD CLAVES Alt. Part # LPA165 UPC Code 731201570213 \$8.55*
- 4. Item No. 205500 Meinl ES-SET 4 Piece Egg Shaker Set Alt. Part # ES-SET UPC Code 840553068832 \$8.99*
- 5. Item No. 257565 Tycoon TGO-M Medium Agogo Bells Alt. Part # TGO-M UPC Code 888680002572 \$17.50*

*For \$129, you could have a personal hand percussion "kit" to last you many years.*

*if the cost of these instruments is an issue, there are less expensive alternatives, from used instruments through Reverb and Ebay, to household or homemade items that make similar sounds.*

*The most serious adjustments to instruction came in 2020, when the university shut down all in-person instruction. The online version of the improvisation course was significantly different from any in-person version. Due to the severe limitations on synchronized music-making online, the course emphasis was shifted to at-home practices.*

*(What appears below is a model for conducting an improvisation course in an online format.)*

*In this document you will find course-related activities that can be completed remotely. These, along with the online Improvisation Ensemble Zoom class meetings, will help you develop as an improvising musician and as a teacher of improvisation. Some weeks the emphasis will be on solo improvisation, while other weeks will emphasize being of support*

*to others when improvising, or facilitating improvisation activities. As you progress through the semester, try to spend equal time on all three of these areas.*

*Because we will be limited in the kinds of breath-related activities that are permissible during Covid-19 conditions, vocal improvisation practices will be assigned for completion at home. The same will be true for wind instrument play.*

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*Here are four important “go-to” activities to practice daily throughout this course:*

- 1. practice “play what you sing” for five minutes every day throughout this course. Sing a short phrase and immediately find the matching notes on your instrument. You will be surprised at what this can do for your fluency in expressing musical and emotional ideas on your instrument.*
  - 2. practice “solo over a drone” for five minutes every day throughout this course. Hold long tones and immerse yourself in each interval and its tensions before you shift notes. Listen deeply. Instead of changing notes quickly, move when you are moved.*
  - 3. practice “free improvisation” for five minutes every day throughout this course. This can be one long improv, or several shorter ones. Make any sounds that come to mind – conventional or un-, using standard instruments and found objects that make interesting sounds. Expand your ears.*
  - 4. practice “listening to silence” for five minutes every day throughout this course. Don’t just do something, sit there. You will find that there are sounds around you that you only notice when you shift your listening. Once you have “attuned” to your surroundings in this way, your music making will be more tuned in as well.*
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*Week 1 - Attend both Zoom video sessions during the assigned class time, 4:15-5:30 on Monday and Wednesday. Links for the Zoom meetings will be provided by the instructor via email to your Adelphi account.*

*Do these two solo activities at home -*

- 1. Improvising vocally over a drone. This is a practice that will serve you well if you do it daily.*

*Using a keyboard or a sampled constant sound, sing over a drone for 2-3 minutes without stopping. Amuse yourself with your singing, keeping it fresh. After you have practiced this activity, record yourself improvising over a drone note or interval. You can download a drone sound file from the class Moodle page Topic 4, or follow the links to the other drone sound files online. Use the drone to do all of the following:*

- a. explore the full range of your voice or instrument by sirening as high and as low as you can go.*
- b. experience the tensions of each scale interval as you very slowly siren through an octave, both ascending and descending, starting with the drone note.*
- c. freely improvise with a drone for at least one minute*
- d. make a one minute recording of yourself improvising over a drone. Email or message the instructor a copy of your recording.*
- e. describe in writing how working with a drone impacts your ear for intervals, tensions and resolutions. Send your write-up to the instructor. Do this at three points during the semester – after week two (by Feb 10), just before spring (by March 17), and before final exam week (by May 12).*

*2. “play what you sing” - Practice, record yourself, write about the experience.*

*Play what you sing, sing what you play. This is the “golden pathway” to instrumental fluency as an improviser. We will be demonstrating this activity in class and it is also described in the Return to Child book pages 153-154.*

*Using short phrases of no more than seven notes:*

- a. improvise phrases on your instrument and immediately sing them, with an ear for the timbre and expression as well as the individual pitches. (sing what you play)*
- b. improvise phrases with your voice and immediately play them, with an ear for the nuance and tone as well as the individual pitches. (play what you sing)*
- c. record 2 examples play what you sing and 2 examples of sing what you play. Be honest about your current skill level.*
- d. Write a few paragraphs describing your experience with this exercise. Send your write-up to the instructor. Do this at three points during the semester – after week two (by Feb 10), just before spring (by March 17), and before final exam week (by May 12).*

*There is no support activity assignment this week.*

*To become familiar with techniques for encouraging others to improvise in large ensembles:*

*Watch at least 30 minutes of CircleSong/Bobby McFerrin videos on the class Moodle page in Topic 21; write a reaction paper that includes which videos you watched, what happened when you tried out the activities yourself, and whether you can make use of these techniques in your music making and your music teaching. Reaction paper due by March 8.*

*Watch at least 30 minutes of Drum Circle Facilitation/Arthur Hull videos from Moodle Topic 21; write a reaction paper that includes which videos you watched, what happened when you tried out the activities yourself, and whether you can make use of these techniques in your music teaching. Reaction paper due by March 8.*

*Week 2 - Attend the Zoom video sessions during assigned class time on Monday and Wednesday.*

*solo activity – continue practice with “sing what you play, play what you sing” and with “solo over a drone.”*

*support activity – Be a good provider of “chord progressions” so that others can improvise. Practice playing chord progressions in a variety of styles and record yourself. Play along with your recording to make sure your progressions are inviting, predictable, interesting, and clearly rhythmic.*

*1. Record yourself playing 30 second examples of chord progressions on piano/ keyboard or guitar, suitable for a partner to improvise over. Play the progressions with good rhythm and control of dynamics. Record at least five different progressions, each with a different overall style (rock, jazz, Baroque, ethnic, country, pop, etc.).*

*There are examples of piano chord progressions in several styles on the class Moodle page in Topic 9. You may learn these or make up your own. By the end of this class, you should be able to play a variety of chord progressions and while playing, lead the group by directing who among the group is playing and who is silent, conducting the dynamic levels, and other contrasts.*

*large ensemble activity – nothing new this week. Keep watching the online examples of Drum Circle Facilitation and of CircleSong facilitation that have links on the class Moodle page, or other examples you seek out on the internet. Begin to notice the body language of expert facilitators. How do they hold the pulse and rhythm in their body to help cue the ensemble to follow along? What “windows” do they pay attention to when they add new parts? How much freedom do they give ensemble members to “make it their own” versus “repeat what the leader does”?*

*Week 3 - Attend the Zoom video classes on Monday and Wednesday.*

*solo activity – “play in various moods” Practice and record yourself.*

*Record yourself improvising in specific moods. Choose five different emotions that show a spectrum of positive and challenging feelings, and record improvisations of 1-2 minutes each. When you make the recording, be sure to state the emotion at the end. Send the recordings to the instructor by email or text. We may use these recordings for the final concert project, so pay attention to the quality of the sound in your recording.*

*support activity – “two handed drumming” Practice and record yourself.*

*1. Record yourself drumming on a hand drum such as a djembe, conga, bongo or tubano.*

*a. Record yourself alternating hands and keeping a steady pulse.*

*b. Record yourself playing rhythms you can sustain and enjoy. Record five different rhythms, one minute each. Send your recordings to the instructor.*

*large ensemble activity – nothing new this week.*

*Week 4 - Attend the Zoom video classes on Monday and Wednesday*

*solo activity – nothing new this week. If you wish, try improvising a “one minute solo” that has a clear beginning, development, and an end. Keep it to one minute by using a clock or a timer.*

*support activities:*

*“Sing in harmony with scales” Practice and record yourself.*

*Play a variety of scales on a piano/keyboard or guitar. Record yourself singing in harmony while playing the scale. Make your harmony an exercise in shadowing (See Return to Child, pages 154-155).*

*a. Sing the notes that are a third above the scale.*

*b. Sing the notes that are a third below the scale.*

*c. Do a) and b) above for four different scales, including some that are major and some minor.*

*d. Write about your experience singing in harmony. How do you find your starting notes? Is it intuitive and automatic, or do you need to think about the intervals? Turn in your writing by March 8.*

*“Call and response” Practice and record yourself.*

*Using your hands on your lap or on a hand drum, tap out a steady pulse or a rhythm. Over this pulse or rhythm, give a vocal call, leaving space for a hypothetical audience to respond and echo your call.*

*a) Record at least ten different calls.*

*b) Listen back to your calls and notice which are easier and which are harder to respond to. Write a few paragraphs describing what calls are easiest to echo and what calls are harder and why. Turn in your writing by March 8.*

*large ensemble activity – nothing new this week.*

*Week 5 – Attend the Zoom video sessions on Monday and Wednesday*

*solo activity – “Verse-and-chorus solos using a backing track” Practice, record yourself.*

*Record yourself improvising along with a “backing track.” The track can be a karaoke arrangement of a popular song or a standard, a “music-minus-one” sound file, a backing track that is available online from YouTube or another website dedicated to backing tracks, or a track you create yourself. You can record your own backing tracks on computer or with a looper/sampler if you have one. Improvise variations on the tune’s melody. Start with what comes naturally. Be prepared to extend or repeat your backing track so you can keep your improvisation going for 3-5 minutes. The longer you go, the more the activity will stretch your imagination. Remember the importance and usefulness of contrasts when you improvise. Play with maximum energy if you naturally hold back; vary your dynamics and timbre to explore nuances of feeling. Put your inner critic to rest whenever it emerges. When you record yourself improvising, document your process. Do not edit the recordings to make them “cleaner,” the breaks and apparent errors or freezes are useful and everyone has them. Don’t submit only the best result. Listen to yourself with both a critical and a complementary ear. What worked? What needs work? What would you do differently? Use a kind and honest process of self-evaluation.*

*Send the instructor a sound file with three examples of verse-and-chorus improvising. Also send a write up of your process and experience, maximum two pages. Turn this in by March 31.*

*support activity – nothing new this week. Keep working on chord progressions, shadowing in harmony, and call and response.*

*large ensemble activity – nothing new. But if you have the opportunity, see if you can try out any of the class improvisation activities with groups of your own.*

*Week 6 – Attend the Zoom classes on Monday and Wednesday*

*Partner activities. (Do these activities only if you have safe access to a musical partner, given the local quarantine situation)*

*Solo/drone, solo/ostinato, homer and roamer.*

*As demonstrated in class and as described in the Return to Child book, pages 156-158.*

a) *With a partner, record yourself doing the "homer and roamer" activity:*

*Person 1 plays takes a rhythmic solo, ending by settling into a short repeating pattern. Person 2 plays a rhythmic solo over the pattern of Person 1, and ends by settling into their own contrasting repeating pattern. Person 1 now takes a rhythmic solo over the pattern of Person 2. Repeat this until each person has soloed 4 times. This activity can be done on any combination of instruments, and can be melodic as well as rhythmic.*

b) *With a partner, record yourself doing the "improvise a short melody and hold the last note" activity. Person 1 takes a short solo, ending by settling on a sustained drone note. Keep the drone note going as long as needed, don't drop out. Person 2 takes a melodic solo over the drone note of Person 1, ending with a new drone note (not necessarily the same note as Person 1). Person 1 and Person 2 alternate solos, each time ending on a sustained last note. Breathe when necessary, but keep the note going. If you are playing a string instrument without a bow or piano, use a trill to sustain the note.*

*Repeat this activity until each person has soloed 4 times.*

c) *Record the activity. Write about your experience in both the solo and support roles. Turn in your write up by March 31.*

*Shadowing (as demonstrated in class and as described in the Return to Child book on pages 154-155).*

a) *Record yourself shadowing a partner's voice or instrument. Have the partner also shadow your voice or instrument. For this to succeed, it needs to be done simultaneously, and therefore in person – even small latencies in online sound transmission may make this activity unworkable.*

*Make your improvised melodies reasonably simple and easy to follow to insure success.*

*Record 4 examples of shadowing.*

b) *write a few paragraphs about your experience with the shadowing activity. Turn in your write up by March 31.*

*Week 7 – Attend the Zoom classes on Monday and Wednesday*

*solo activity – choose your own activity from among the options on the class Moodle page*

*support activity – choose your own*

*large ensemble activity – choose your own*

*Week 8-11*

*Prepare for the class final concert, which may be virtual or on recording. Make three videos of yourself improvising. One will be a live unaccompanied solo. The second will be a multi-layered solo using loopers and samplers (if you have them). The third will be a video of you improvising over a backing track of your choosing or creation. Each video segment should be no longer than three minutes. Turn these in by April 28 to allow time for compilation and editing/mastering.*

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*The activities below should only be done if it is possible to do them safely with consideration for Covid-19 exposure.*

*If possible, make a video of yourself improvising live with partners. The format may range from freely improvised ensembles to structured activities such as Solo/Ostinato or Solo/Drone.*

*If possible, make a video of yourself facilitating improvisation for others using Drum Circle Facilitation techniques (attention call, stop cut, return to groove, sculpting, showcasing, hold the beat in your head, layer in/layer out, etc.).*

*If possible, make a video of yourself facilitating improvisation for others by playing chord progressions for others to play along with while you facilitate dynamics, group composition, showcasing, conversations, etc.*

*If possible, make a video of yourself facilitating improvisation for others using CircleSong techniques (create vocal grooves and contrasting grooves, stack harmony parts, interact by turning parts off and on, etc.).*