

## Introduction to Improvisation Ensemble

(a preview of improv activities and teaching philosophy)

Welcome to the Improvisation Ensemble! Our mission for the semester is to become immersed in improvisation so that by May you will be comfortable participating in improvisation in a broad variety of musical styles, and you will be able to introduce others to improvisation with enthusiasm and encouragement. The activities we will use in this class owe much to the pioneering work of cellist David Darling, who espouses an approach to improvisation that is fundamentally accepting and values authentic emotional expression. This approach in many ways reverses the traditional hierarchy of musical skills and the common sequence of instruction.

Improvisation can be the first skill taught when learning an instrument rather than the last skill. Your music making can be inspired by a quest to express what is moving in you emotionally; if you attempt to express yourself fully, boldly and honestly, you will naturally develop increased levels of technical skill on your voice and instrument. The pursuit of nuances of authentic expression can be what motivates the acquisition of greater levels of technical skill; it is not a requirement that high levels of technical skills be reached before personal music making can be taken seriously.

Consider how visual art is taught in public schooling: from the earliest grades, students are given great freedom to explore media and express their experiences of the world through shape, space, color, texture and contrast. Most school children welcome the opportunity to take a blank piece of paper and fill it as they wish, learning by doing. They develop skills through spontaneous experience. When students reach the early elementary grades, they are able to harness these artistic skills to represent their understanding of concepts and relationships visually, as when they illustrate their own stories. The accepted path to learning involves access to media (blank paper, paints, pencils, crayons, markers, etc.) and both permission and encouragement to create.

In contrast, consider how music is taught in the same institutions: from the earliest grades, students are given high levels of structure to follow. They sing songs in unison as a group. They are taught the positive values of socialization through sharing a common pulse and tonality, for sure. But the individual expression of feelings is simply not part of the way music is taught. Students are not given access to a variety of sound making media (keyboards, drums, strings, winds) and blank amounts of time to learn by doing. They are not encouraged to find ways to express themselves in sound or think of themselves as creative players or composers. Perhaps it would be too chaotic to approach music education as we approach education in visual arts, but perhaps not.

I will assume most of you taking this course have been acculturated in the educational pedagogical mindset described above. In visual art, you learn by doing and by expressing what is emotionally meaningful. In musical art, you learn by conforming to social norms, and if you are talented, privileged or lucky, you eventually get access to some instrument, which you learn to play in a large ensemble, following a set program of performance-

oriented skill development. If you persist long enough, you may get to improvise a solo in a jazz ensemble, or compose a piece of music that follows compositional rules in a music theory class. If you reject the restrictions of academic music, you may get more creative opportunities in a rock band, unless the purpose of the band is to faithfully cover and mimic the literature of classic and contemporary rock.

In this culture, how does one get the experience needed to develop confidence in oneself as an improviser? What activities and what attitudes would foster the growth of improvisation skills? In the words of Lao-Tsu, we would need perhaps to "Return to Child."

*It is the child that sees the primordial secret of nature, and it is the child of ourselves we return to. The child within us is simple and daring enough to live the secret.*

Simple and daring. That is our beginning place. We need permission to be simple without feeling childish, and encouragement to be daring without fear of criticisms from ourselves or others. Musical expression is a natural part of human existence. Children learn by playing, whether they are pushing toy cars along an imaginary road or humming a never-before-heard song. Respecting play as an avenue of learning is a key part of the philosophy of this class.

What stands in the way of being playful? In a word, judgment. Judgment is useful in its place. Discernment, maturity, discrimination, and distinction all require comparisons, which are judgments when they are not objective measurements. But judgment very quickly can become stifling of spontaneity. We naturally want approval as human beings, just as much as we want to be expressive and playful.

In past years, I have found that the internal critic that students bring to this class is often a powerful tyrant, prohibiting learning while supposedly protecting students from the embarrassment of a wrong note.

*Better to keep silent and have people wonder if you are a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.*

The internal critic in us has had years to develop. Music, and all sounds, are far more public than visual images. A misplaced or distorted line is not immediately a focus of group attention the same way an unexpected note is when played on a trombone or sung in a voice too inexperienced not to crack.

Undoing years of ingrained fear of criticism is a formidable task, but we have to start somewhere. We begin by keeping things simple and emphasizing safety.

*There is dignity in risk.*

In this class you will be encouraged when you enter the world of sound, your explorations will be met with approval, and there is no more worthy cause than to take the risk to try something new. It might be a revelation in a snarky and critical world to get applause for

being willing to try. We work to undo the habits of mocking that characterize so much of TV commentary on art, music and fashion. Once you know the instructor is not going to negatively evaluate you for not already knowing what the class is designed to teach you, you are left to confront your own inner judgments, with the help of the instructor and the group of peers sharing the class experience with you.

Simplicity. We can improvise one moment at a time, one sound at a time, and one breath at a time. Imitation is a perfectly acceptable path to improvisation, so long as you know that you are free to make any sound your own way. Here is a beat – the instructor taps his knees in rhythm. Join the beat in any way you like. The more tentative may exactly copy the beat and gestures. No problem – that is a safe way to start. The more adventuresome may add contrast – good for them! And what happens when the adventure turns to misadventure? When the beat is lost, or the hands don't quite do what was intended? Simplicity does not require long analysis of what went wrong. It just requires release, and a fresh start.

Join a beat, contrast with a beat. Join a drone, harmonize the drone. Rhythm and melody serve as building blocks for expressive improvisation. These are the simple social music activities, since someone has to provide the drone or the beat and, for the moment, serve as an accompanist.

And what is an equally simple solo activity? Let me take a quick aside for cuing you in to the “big picture:” in the long run, we are aiming for expressive fluency. We are seeking musical expression on an instrument that is as natural and rapid as singing, or to put it another way, singing with your fingers. At the same time, we want our improvisation to be rooted in deeply felt emotion that satisfies our creative impulse and can profoundly impact us and our listeners. How do we get there? One breath at a time.

We begin with the voice as the first instrument, and as the instrument closest to our source of feelings. We begin with the ways all humans use their voices for unreflected emotional expression, as happens when we sigh, moan, and yelp. This is also music, or it is at times pointless to try to distinguish where music leaves off and other expressions in sound begin.

You have all at one time or another spontaneously sang when sitting behind the wheel of your car, or when in the shower, or when walking somewhere with your mind on something other than music. Making music naturally is a great start.

#### Personal music

What kind of artists would children be if we only let them fill in the outlines of stencils that were created by someone else? They would be stifled and constrained and cut off from more complete and healthy expression. At its core, Music is personal. Our musical preferences for Indie, or Brahms, or Coltrane reflect who we are as people. And the same is true for the music we make, especially when we are not thinking specifically about making music. When our attention is on other things, like a walk in the park or an outdoor chore around the house, and we find ourselves humming or singing, we are being naturally musical, an innate human quality. Unreflected and un-judged, for the moment

we are the embodiment of the music we make. It expresses who we are, at least in some small part.

Besides music that is casual, music can also be intensely personal. In some cultures it is typical for mourning to be expressed in wailing, without regard to propriety or whether such an expression of grief might be inconvenient to others. Our grief, or our prayers, when they are expressed in sound are about as intensely personal a music as we can make. There is no cognitive process of constructing the music at such times. Music and feeling are one, and each person's music will naturally be different and unique.

For those who practice becoming open to musical expression, personal music does not have to be limited to times when it "leaks" from us. We can access it any time, for amusement, for emotional release, or as a path to more elaborate composition.

Many years ago (in the 1980s), I was a fan of the music of the Paul Winter Consort. Besides being a pioneering group that brought jazz to the White House and world music to jazz, Paul Winter used the field recordings of animals and natural reverberating spaces in his compositions. Wolves being wolves, whales being whales and eagles being eagles. His saxophone duet with wolf cries changed my way of listening to sounds in nature.

*Don't worry about saving these songs, and if one of our instruments break, it doesn't matter. We have fallen into the place where everything is music.*  
- Rumi

In the early 1980s, the singer with the Paul Winter Consort was Susan Osborn. Susan was a deeply spiritual person, experienced in meditation and an exponent of a practice that emphasized gratitude as a path. She originated a method for making authentic sound that was simple and profound. In a circle of witnesses, one person at a time was coached to breathe, sigh, tone, and sing, until they were finished expressing what was moving inside them emotionally. The sounds reflected each individual's process in contacting their emotional reservoirs.

For one person their most authentic sound might be a slow siren, for another a primal scream, for another a bluesy wail, and for another an Om. When engaging in this process as part of a group, the sounds that people make when uncovering their personal authenticity, and the sounds of self-acceptance impacted the listeners as much as the singers. Each person was singing for the whole circle.

With my background in psychology, I initially looked at Susan Osborn's singing process with curiosity. I watched as people were coached on their posture, to hold less tension and be more open. To stand with knees slightly bent and jaw relaxed, balanced on the balls of their feet, in martial-arts style. People were coached on their breathing, to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, and to avoid panting or hyperventilating. Lastly, people were coached to make sound, starting with an "ahh" and to siren up and down slowly, listening for the changes in their body's resonant places.

(this process has been described in detail in several books, notably Susan Elizabeth Hale *Sound and Silence* and Shawna Carol *The Way of Song*).

As a listener, big changes vocal resonance were apparent as the person continued to sing in this open and unplanned manner. Their voices became more richly timbred as more overtones could be heard. The singers were often surprised at the quality of their own voice that emerged from the process; a richer voice with more range and expressive quality.

I include mention of this process here, as odd a process as it might seem to some readers, because the process has a lot in common with other approaches to improvisation that emphasize spontaneity over planning. Susan's approach was to seek emotional expression at its source in the body and the breath. If the singing became melodic, that was OK, as long as the melody emerged from the process and not from the ego. Songs often had symphony type movements to them, with an intense segment of emotional expression followed by a more calm and melodic portion. When each new breath began to sound like the one before it, the emotional transformation was done. When the person was finished with their session, the whole group took some breaths together or sang a simple song together to reconnect.

Where is there a place for such a process outside of a music workshop? I was once (or more than once) in a hospital delivery room. A baby was being born. A young woman was using her ability to make musical sound to partly yell and partly sing through the pangs of childbirth pain. One nurse was attempting to have her be more quiet: "Hush! You'll disturb the other patients!" Another nurse was more open: "Honey, you make whatever sounds you want to help you deal with this!" It is beyond the scope of this course to delve into the physiology of singing. But suffice it to say that changes in breathing go along with singing sustained notes, and changes in endorphin levels accompany singing when in physical or emotional pain or exertion. Take childbirth as an example of a time when it can help a human being to make their own music-medicine.

And what about daily life? The lessons of musical expression that are motivated by the overflow of grief or pain or ecstasy can be applied to more mundane frustrations and gratifications as well. In the fall of 2012 I was a guest in an "Arts and Healing" class, where I presented a unit on improvisation. Hurricane Sandy had recently devastated the east coast, especially the New York and Long Island area near the college (Adelphi U.). The students in the class were mainly nursing students, not experienced in music. They were a bit shy about making sounds in public (although they found group karaoke much less threatening). We did one go-round around the room in which each person made a sound for the length of one breath, expressing some emotion that was associated with the recent hurricane. The offerings included sighs, curses, screams, whimpers, calls for help and comfort, sounds of exasperation, frustration, loss and survival. The most affected in the group were people who went for weeks without power in their homes and who were subject to long waits for gasoline. Some of the participants knew people who had been flooded out of their homes. The sounds they made told as much about their experiences as a more lengthy (but less intimate) verbal description.

Back to basics.

Put yourself in the first class session of a semester, entering a class billed as the "Improvisation Ensemble." Except no one in the class has had much prior experience improvising. How would the class begin? Most years, after the briefest introduction, we would go directly to the experience of improvising together. We might start with a rhythm jam using our body sounds – tapping hands on laps, then creating contrast using bellies, faces, stomping feet, snapping fingers, hand claps, etc.

### Modeling and Experiential Education

When I teach, I am thinking about both improvisational skills and the methods I use to teach them, since I want my students to internalize both the content and the pedagogical approach. My goal is to teach by doing and not by talking; if there is talk, I talk after there has been a musical experience not before. It is a tricky thing to create learning experiences that are clear, powerful, simple and do not require a set of verbal instructions beforehand. To accomplish this, modeling is a great teaching tool. If I want to get my class to keep a beat by tapping hands on knees, I will model this myself, and use eye contact to communicate that I would like them to join in. If the group is shy or reluctant, I might give a brief verbal invitation: "copy me; or do what I am doing." But I will also allow them to be creative and do whatever I am doing in their own way. David Darling put it this way: "you are not doing what I'm doing, you are doing what you're doing."

Offering a model is different from insisting on a model as the one right way. Part of creating a safe environment for creative expression is for the teacher to be a fellow-explorer and not a judge or evaluator. The teacher can at times be a coach, but coaching too soon can stifle creativity and spontaneity.

Some students will seek to gain the teacher's approval. To foster an atmosphere of safety and risk-taking, approve everything that is not destructive to the class atmosphere. In my work as a psychologist, I came across a book on child rearing with the long title, "How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk." Among the authors' many useful suggestions is that parents, to support a child's self-esteem, should offer four times as many positive comments to negative ones, or four Yeses to every No. This is a reasonable model for teachers as well. Yeses promote self-confidence, reduce anxiety, increase independence, and help establish an atmosphere of trust. In music, one does not often have to say a No, except to protect an instrument or a person from injury. The sound itself teaches.

A teacher can ask "what did you hear?" and students will be able to describe their experience of sound, separate from their judgments about the sounds and the people producing them. If two people jamming do not lock into a common groove, it will be apparent. If they resolve the clash of beats, everyone will hear it. If they do not, we can all search for solutions without blame. Not surprisingly, the best solution is often to simplify. Play slower, play fewer sounds, drop out and listen attentively in silence. Exactly copy what your partner is doing; mirror or shadow them. Play a simple pulse that is predictable and clear, and support that pulse with your body movements, so your cues are both aural

and visual. Some people have challenges of physical coordination or sound processing that makes it hard for them to match or coordinate with the rhythms of others, and even harder to match the pitches of others or harmonize. Such people need a gentle and patient approach that does not obviously single them out as lacking in skill. If you are working in duets, the person with the challenge can go first and set whatever pulse or pitch they can sustain alone. If their partner is more experienced and can readily match, mirror, and support, the partner can follow any fluctuations in tempo or tonality. This makes whatever the weaker-skilled person does seem correct.

When a person feels correct, they are willing to stay with the experience longer. Length of practice builds competence. Skills improve, and independence follows.

Teaching with compassion; games with no losers

I tend to build complexity in my classes by layering one activity on top of another. For example, let's say I start with setting a pulse with my hands on my knees. I invite the class to join me, and let's say they can and they do. If I want to have them experience attentive listening and following, I will soon introduce variations in my steady pulse. I may cue them with eye contact that "something is going to happen!," or cue them to imitate and "do what I do." After preparing them with cues, I can stop tapping my knees and count the pulse in the air. This gives them an experience of "internal listening" or audiation for a brief time, then I can resume tapping on my knees with the expectation that the group will mirror me.

When leading in this way, I do not want to stop and make anyone wrong for not following quickly enough. I want listening and mimicking to be an enjoyable game with no losers.

Layering of activities – deep learning in the unattended channel

I may introduce a call with my voice while keeping the pulse with my hands. A simple call will be in a familiar rhythm, such as a four-beat rhythm: One, two and three and four. These calls will be in rhythm, but contrasting with the steady pulse – louder, or in a new timbre that I can create by using a different part of my body to tap on. Later I can add words to the rhythm: "I am a beat machine." One two and three four. "I am creative." I will try to come up with calls that have verbal content that is consistent with the class atmosphere I am seeking to encourage. If I use the opposite message: "I am no good at this," I will do so in the role of a clown, with an exaggeratedly sad facial expression. "I beat myself up." We can call attention to how we judge ourselves and stifle ourselves in a playful way that can make it easier to let go of such attitudes. Calls need to be predictable at first. If your first call uses a four beat cycle, your next few calls should also be in four beat cycle, so your students can gain experience via success, safety and trust.

Preparation breeds success

When you introduce a change, warn them that something new is coming. "Get ready..." Predictable calls in four-meter always have a sound on the downbeat of One. If your rhythm has silent spaces (e.g.- one two rest rest), hold the silent space with a gesture, such as flicking your hands in the air on the rest beats. This helps people hold the beat in their inner listening, since there is a movement associated with each beat, even when every

movement does not produce a sound. After a few different rhythmic calls over a steady pulse, I might introduce a tonal call. A simple tonal call might be two notes: “Hey – Yo-oh” using a C and an A below the C or a C and a G below the C or even a C and the C an octave below it. The pitch is not the key detail, but the interval is. A minor third is a very common interval and easy to reproduce for most people. It is the interval of the cliché mocking chant (nah-nah-na-nah-nah). The fifth is the interval of every oom-pah bass line. And the octave provides contrast without introducing any harmonic complexity at all. Beginning calls are intended to be easy, predictable and familiar. “Do-re-mi” works as a call because we are all so familiar with the major scale. Repetition of the same call two or three times helps insure success and reinforces the pattern's familiarity. But after a few repetitions, most creative minds crave novelty. It is good to make a small change in the call to keep the listeners engaged and active. Do-re-mi with a major third (C – D – E) can be morphed into a minor version (C – D – E flat). Any pattern can be presented in reverse order (E – D – C).

The profoundness of simplicity

Let's say in this hypothetical first meeting the group had done the following: a) joined with me tapping a steady pulse on their knees, b) added their own variations to the rhythm while I held a steady pulse, c) added timbral complexity by using a variety of body parts in addition to our knees, d) imitated a rhythmic call by tapping, e) vocalized in response to a rhythmic call, f) vocalized a response to a call while holding a steady pulse, and g) vocalized responses to calls that used tonal contrasts to create simple melodies. What musical skills would I have introduced?

A. Joining a steady pulse involves entrainment – the establishment of a predictable group rhythm. The presence of the group sound makes each person's contribution anonymous and therefore safe from exposure and potential critique. At the same time, the presence of stronger and more regular players within the group helps less experienced players regulate their timing. The sound itself gives the feedback, with a live example of when the group beat is crisp and when it is muddy.

B. The drum circle leader Arthur Hull frequently tells his participants to “make it your own.” He does not wish to be the dictator and enforcer of a group beat. He wants to encourage creativity and personal expression by permitting free variations, including ones that threaten to create chaos. He welcomes chaos as an opportunity for enhanced listening and reorganization; for spontaneous and organic change that emerges from the group rather than from the leader. When participants experiment with their own variations over a steady pulse, they are engaging on three levels – they are coordinating their sounds with the leader's pulse; they are tapping their own creative sources for new ideas; and they are interacting with each other in playful and inspiring ways. They are socially responsive and internally responsive at the same time.

C. Switching up body parts adds complexity. It models a key compositional element, namely contrast. The sound of a lap differs from the sound of a belly. The sound of a whole hand clap differs from the sound of two fingers on a palm. The sound of fingers tapping on cheeks can change as your mouth opens and closes.

D and E. Among the most universal musical forms around the world is call and response. The echoing part of call and response can be a general imitation before it gets refined enough to be a more exact copy. It is more important for the leader to be encouraging of any attempt to imitate than to be insistent on accuracy. One way teachers and workshop leaders can use call and response is to embed concepts into the calls. For example, while every call and response is technically a rhythm activity, if a major scale (do-re-mi) is included as a call, the activity is now both rhythmic and melodic. If half the group holds a drone note while the other half responds to a do-re-mi call, the activity now has a harmonic aspect.

F. Whether it is called “scaffolding,” “layering,” using a “platform,” or any other term, each musical activity, once it is securely accomplished by the group, can serve as a backdrop for a new activity. Rich music often has multiple elements occurring simultaneously. We are all able to be drummers and singers at the same time. When we hold a steady beat as a group and listen for calls to respond to with our voices, we are using what some psychologists call “an unattended channel.” The beat gets carried in an automatic and unreflected way, building body memory, much like we can ride a bicycle and look at the scenery at the same time.

G. Here is a sequence of layering I have often used in a workshop: I start out with the group copying a simple pulse on their laps. I divide the group into sections and have half the group play something that contrasts with the simple pulse. I switch around which group is the “soloist” and which is the “accompanist” so no one gets stale or bored. When the group has generated an interesting groove, I add a vocal component. First, I model holding a long note. Then I divide the group and have half of the group hold the tonic and half the group harmonize a long note. Once the group is secure with the harmony, it is possible to conduct starts and stops so the voices sound like a brass section on an old R&B tune. Groups can absolutely do this, creating complex layered music with an improvised rhythm, and simple but tight harmony. This whole structure can form the backdrop for a soloist to step up and provide a vocal or instrumental solo “over the top” of the steady sound from the rest of the group. Fun!

#### Small successes

It is important to find a way to respect and meet student improvisers and student teachers of improvisation at their present level of competence and experience, which may be modest in the area of improvisation. The level of acceptance and encouragement I experienced from many excellent players and leaders at Music for People events over the years inspired me to approach teaching improvisation with the same attitude. Improvisation is personal in ways that performing the music of others is not. There are multitudes of musicians who are adept at playing pre-learned pieces and who are petrified at being faced with the opportunity to make spontaneous music. They often feel embarrassed, unprepared, and expectant of criticism. This is not a nurturing environment for creativity! To counterbalance these attitudes, what can a teacher of improvisation do? For one, I can celebrate the accomplishment of small successes. Even making one spontaneous sound is an accomplishment for some fearful beginners, no matter how well

they play prepared pieces. The act of taking a new risk is also worthy of big praise. I find ways to communicate that the creative spirit is already active in each player.

Stephen Nachmanovitch, author of *Free Play*, reminds us that we are all very experienced improvisers. Every conversation we have is an improvisation, and we find our words relatively effortlessly. When we believe we have the skills, there is no barrier to spontaneous creativity. Conversely, when we doubt ourselves, we lose touch with our inherent abilities to be musical and to express our inner states in sound. For people who are new to improvisation, the first lesson can be a painless introduction if the teacher is able to distract and disarm the new players, while engaging them in sound making that is physically easy and qualitatively rewarding. This minimizes the fear of criticism, and helps convince the students that they are capable and competent (which they are).

Novelty breeds interest and distracts from self-criticism

I often use my Hang drum to break the ice in a first class. The Hang drum (and its related "handpan" drums - the Halo, the Hapi, and others) is a steel drum with hammered tonal areas, but in contrast to the large concave steel drums of Trinidad, these handpans are smaller, more portable, and convex in shape. I have heard the Hang drum described as "two woks welded together," "a viking shield," or "a ufo." It does have an odd and exotic look to it. But what makes the Hang an ideal instrument to introduce improvisation to newcomers is the quality of its sound and how easily it "speaks."

Many Hang drums are made in pentatonic tunings. This means every note blends with every other note without harsh dissonances. In the words of *Music for People*, "there are no wrong notes." Later on in improvisation training, the idea of no wrong notes will be expanded to include dissonance, nature sounds, and all sound. But for beginners, one of the key fears is the embarrassment of hitting a "clinker." When the instrument has no clinkers, that fear can be minimized if not eliminated. The Hang presents the notes of a scale around a central bass note, or "ding." Hangs are tuned to A440 standard, so they can be played with orchestral and band instruments. The layout of hammered tone centers forms a scale that alternates from the right side to the left around the circular drum surface. That means if you alternate your hands in a simple left-right, left-right pattern as you tap around the circular surface, you will play the notes of a scale. The way the drum is constructed, even if you miss the tone centers, the drum makes pleasing tones that are combinations of the nearby tones.

The Hang is a hand drum. Even though it is metal, is meant to be played with fingers, fleshy parts of hands and (perhaps) knuckles, but not with sticks or hard mallets, which can damage the surface and the tuning. In this way the Hang has much in common with skin percussion instruments from around the world, such as djembes and congas.

When I take out the Hang drum and hold it up, the students are generally interested and curious. As soon as I tap the tones and start drumming on it, they are ready to try it themselves. The instrument fits neatly on my lap, where I support the underside with my knees. There is an opening on the underside that allows the bassier sounds to escape. Like other drums, its "mouth" needs to be open; the instrument needs to be elevated off of a flat

surface to sound its best. To play the Hang drum, I use the same hand techniques that I might use playing a djembe, with center tones, strikes and slaps. But if I knew nothing about hand drum technique and only hit the drum like I was giving a friend a “high five,” I would be able to get a pleasant sound from the instrument.

After a brief demonstration of the Hang, I invite a volunteer from the class to play with me. We move two chairs to face each other, supporting the drum across our two laps. I ask my partner to give me a high five in the air above the drum, and then to hit the drum the same way, anywhere on the surface. I do not give a lengthy verbal instruction, only a caution to protect the drum head by removing rings or bracelets before playing. I let the evolution of technique derive from the experience of playing.

Some players dive right in and drum on the various tone centers. If that's the case, I experiment with the student's ability to hold rhythms and respond to contrasting rhythms. I may support the rhythm the student is playing for a while, then play between the beats, play triplets against the beat, or even briefly play “off rhythm” on purpose. I want to assess what strengths the student has in the areas of holding a steady pulse, playing known rhythms reliably, playing spontaneously with a steady beat, holding a beat when a partner is playing, holding a beat when a partner pushes or drags the beat, holding a pulse while a partner solos, holding a rhythm while a partner solos, interacting playfully in a musical conversation, etc. I may not have the time or the inclination to formally test all of these skills during a brief improvised duet, but I am watching these aspects of the student's playing with one eye and ear while interacting with the other. I do not want to push any student too far or create a situation that raises fearfulness, so everything I do has the goal of being gently playful rather than challenging.

Starting an improvisation can be a little like rolling a snowball down a hill. The music can gain momentum on its own, and it does not have an obvious stopping place. Part of making sure the students feel they are OK with their playing is to coach the endings. I might just step in vocally and count the improvisation to an end: “1, 2, 3 and stop!” (with the “and” on the 4 beat and “stop!” on the next 1 beat). Or I might suggest the players make eye contact with each other and nonverbally signal a mutual stopping place. I will always stop when my partner does. As in theater improv, “making the other person right” is a key element of a coherent improvisation.

Watching peers have a fun time playing the Hang drum can inspire other students to want to volunteer to try it. The instrument can accommodate three players comfortably and four if they are able to share a tight space. After a few initial exploratory experiences have been shared, I can ask questions about the process of playing spontaneous music in a group. “How was it?” is often the first question. Students verbalize their transition from nervousness to a less self-conscious state. They note the joys of exploring and interacting.

#### Honest feedback

I encourage students to tell the whole truth when they speak about a process or experience. That includes noting when something was not pleasant or satisfying. Let's say an improvised trio on the Hang drum was dominated by one enthusiastic player who was

loud, who used much of the drum surface, and who did not stop or lower his or her volume level to listen to what others were doing. Let's say that person had a great time, but at least one of his partners was frustrated, saying, "I could not find open spaces to play in" or "It felt like I was not being listened to." This is valuable information for all. As a teacher, I might ask each student "what might you have done to make the experience better for you?" and I might also ask the whole group of players and listeners for suggestions. What will emerge are suggestions for making more coordinated group music. The dominant player (or the frustrated player) might say: "I could have stopped playing," which is actually a great musical contribution, since silence is a highly contrasting musical element. Other suggestions might be to "copy what others are doing," "just hold a steady beat," or "get eye contact with your playing partners." Each suggestion is more meaningful when presented as a solution to an actual musical interaction than if they were given as intellectual guidelines before people ever played a note together. I keep a mental checklist of the key skills I expect the students to glean from the experience, and after the students have played and talked about their experience, I will add in any lessons that did not emerge spontaneously.

### Second Movement

After a playing experience has been discussed, I will often let the same group play again, so they can immediately implement the comments in an organic experiential way in the music. Once a few trios have played and spoken about playing, the group has the benefit of experiencing themselves as successful improvisers in this relatively safe environment. They have played on an instrument that no one had prior experience with, so there was no expectation that anyone would be good at it or have to live up to their training or credentials. They have played in a social setting with spontaneous interaction among the players. They have likely uncovered the basics of rhythmic improvisation: holding a steady pulse, holding a steady rhythm, creating variations in a rhythm, making a bold rhythmic statement, copying a peer, answering a peer, using silence strategically, using dynamics to create interest, using tempo changes and organizing starting and stopping places. Doubtless there is much to develop in the way of further depth and experience with these principles, but in one or two simple activities, these elements of musicality get introduced and practiced in painless ways. And these skills, once learned, apply to all other types of musical settings that the students participate in, from traditional bands, orchestras, chamber groups and choruses, to jam bands, jazz combos, bluegrass bands, and house parties.

Maintaining interest throughout the whole group.

Music often consists of a set of players and an audience. When the audience is both polite and engaged, they contribute to the depth of the listening in which the music takes place. We have all experienced that kind of deep listening. So deep that when a piece of dramatic music ends, the sounds reverberate in an awesome silence, and the whole group enjoys and respects the silence as part of the intensity of the musical experience. Applause is the anti-climax or release from the intensity of the experience. But we have also likely experienced a modern stadium concert, at which the audience is somewhat distracted, with side conversations, phone and text messages, or unsolicited sing-alongs. Listening is not a universal element of music events.

In *Return to Child*, I wrote “listening is the most important of all musical skills.” Allaudin Mathieu's book on musicality is called “The Listening Book.” We can hope that the players will be engaged enough in the musical interaction to be listening first, foremost and always. But what about the audience? How do we create experiences that include the audience in the listening experience in a deep and meaningful way?

Arthur Hull is a drum circle leader with an international following. He has written some excellent and accessible books about spontaneous music making for large groups of percussion. He describes the mindset of the group leader as always including the whole group, which can mean that for the leader, there is no separation of players and audience. When Arthur wants to create new levels of contrast and deepen the listening experience, he may step in and divide the group of players so that some keep playing and some are silent. As soon as he does this, he has divided the group into the portion that is being temporarily highlighted, and the rest of the circle of players. To this second group, technically an audience (since they are listening but not playing), he devotes as much of his attention as to the portion of the group he is conducting. He needs to know if they are listening actively or if they are drifting. Signs of boredom can range from slumped body language to rhythmic mutiny, when players reenter the music unsolicited.

One of my goals as a teacher is to have the whole class feel engaged in the music making, whether they are playing or are temporarily silent. I aim to inspire an effortless alertness, and a mindset of service to the music. Sometimes, the best thing I can do as a player in an ensemble is to be quiet and let another player's contribution be heard undiluted. My silence is support, and like any other team activity, any single musician in the group can speak for all of the musicians in the group. Nonetheless, I am likely to lose the attention of some undergraduate students in a class if I work with two or three small ensembles in a row and due to the size of the class there are students who are not part of any of the performing groups. How do I keep them engaged?

First of all, I borrow from Hull. I keep the whole group in my radar. If the group is attentive, I do not have to intervene. But if their attention wanes, I will engage them first with eye contact. Then I will give them something to do that supports the music. If a trio is playing in a circle of twenty other students, I will have the outer circle keep time, tapping two fingers in the opposite palm; or I will ask them to use their voices to imitate other percussion instruments in support of the overall rhythm (e.g. - make shaker noises (ch-ch-ch-ch)). I will stop cut the showcased ensemble so the outer circle can hear themselves play alone; during this time I can work on the intensity of their listening and the coordination of their sounds, so that when the central ensemble is brought back in, they have a tighter rhythm section playing with them. I may fade the groups in or out rather than stop and start them abruptly.

When I was in elementary and middle school, like many similar aged boys, I was a fan of wrestling. Since then, I have heard the WWE or the WWF described as “soap operas for males.” I am not concerned here with masks, belts, muscles or bravado. Just with one element of team sports, the tag-team. Wrestlers who competed in pairs were able to switch

off who was in the ring by touching hands. What is the connection to music? One way of keeping group interest up is to allow for there to be tagteams. If a trio is playing, each person might have a partner standing behind at the ready. The partner can tap to switch in to the trio, being careful not to have all three switch at once and risk losing the ongoing rhythm. Or random members of the group can tag in. This can involve a larger number of the whole group in active listening.

#### Contrasts again

Let's fill 16 beats with a steady pulse: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16. Now let's follow that with eight beats of silence: (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8). Can you tap that on your desk and hear the contrast of regular rhythm and internal rhythm? We naturally entrain. Not entertain, entrain. We use the regularity of rhythms and cycles in our lives to automatically predict what will happen next. If we did not entrain, we would not be surprised when our predictions were violated by changes. That's entertainment. Active listening capitalizes on entrainment and inner rhythms. Fill another 16 beats with a steady pulse, but this time, tap out a solo during the 8 beats that follow. What did you do for your solo? My guess is you played with contrasts. Was your solo 8 steady beats, identical to the beats of the pulse? Or did you create accents of loud and soft? Did you drop beats or speed up so the intervals were shorter and longer? Or use more than one kind of sound to have a contrast in timbre?

Any solo that manipulates contrasts has a chance of being musically interesting, possibly because it follows enough of the beat to be predictable, and is just different enough to keep our listening constantly recalibrating. And where do we get contrasts from? From our mysterious inner source.

In a first or second class of a semester, I am likely to emphasize safety over exposure. But I do not want to make the experience too boring. If I model tapping a pulse on my lap, the whole class will be able to join me and copy the beat. I can model a pattern of 16 steady beats followed by 8 beats of silence as described above. Then I can model filling the 8 beats of silence with some interesting rhythmic solo, returning to the steady pulse when I am done. In the 16 beats that follow my solo, I can look around the room for someone to take the next solo, and invite them with eyes and gestures to be the next to solo, or I can ask "who's next?" My preference is to ask for volunteers, rather than "go around the circle" and put everyone in the position of having to do something, ready or not. I want to reward enthusiasm with opportunity to play, and respect the students' inhibitions in the first few classes. Similarly, I would rather have a student be authentically silent than manufacture a solo that their heart is not into.

#### Back to call and response

We tap 16 beats of a pulse. Someone takes an 8 beat solo. I stop cut the group and model copying the solo that we just heard. Then I bring the group back to the 16 beats of steady pulse. When the next person solos, I invite the whole group to imitate the solo as best they can. Exact cloning is not necessary; impressionistic copies are acceptable.

What is the difference between a solo and a call? Solos are not social. Calls should be social. Being social involves a higher level of user-friendliness, which also amounts to a higher level of conditional restrictions. For example, a call (if it is going to be clearly answered) needs to have an unambiguous time period. Rests within a call create uncertainty about whether the call is over or not. Should I answer or keep listening? To create a clear 8 beat call, there needs to be a sound on the downbeats of 1 and 5, or else the group might think the call was a 4 beat pattern. Solos have no such restrictions. They are not constructed to be easy to repeat, only to be authentically expressive.

Adding improv to the instrument I play most at home

Gentle introductions to improvisation involve percussion and simple instruments. But most of us do not play simple instruments as our main endeavor. We play instruments that have challenging technical requirements in order to play in tune or play expressively. How can we use our instruments to improvise, and capitalize on the many hours of practice and development we have already invested?

I was introduced to free improvisation by Paul Winter and the members of his Consort in the 1980s (David Darling, Jim Scott, Glen Velez, Ted Moore, Nancy Rumble). I had been a folk and rock guitarist since childhood, and had played upright bass in high school orchestra. Jam bands like the Grateful Dead and Cream were popular during my teen years, and improvising in rock and blues format was within my comfort zone. But even as an improviser experienced in certain musical styles, improvising in new styles was intimidating. Jazz and classical musicians might have felt similarly; at home with the styles of their musical home base, but clueless or tentative in other styles.

The basic activity of Paul's workshops (and of those of David Darling and Music for People) was a free improvisation quartet. Four musicians sat facing each other in silence. One started, the others joined in, they mixed, blended, conversed, contrasted, and at some point came back to silence, all without a score, a script, or any pre-made agreements as to key, time, or style.

The first time I attended a workshop with Paul Winter I brought a variety of percussion instruments to play. Although I had my guitar with me, I did not use it. Like many guitarists, I was caught up in a harmonic mindset of chords and chord changes. It would have been too controlling of me to impose chord structures on a quartet in a free improvisation setting. But without chords, what was I supposed to play? Lead lines on an un-amplified acoustic guitar are often lost in the midst of an ensemble with louder orchestral instruments. It took a long time for me to learn how to play so that I could make a positive contribution to the quartet and also play something from my heart rather than my head.

The first things I learned to do were to simplify my playing and accept my place in the ensemble. As a guitarist among orchestral instruments, I was often the softest instrument in the group. I could not play sensitively and pound out notes as loud as possible. However, I could be heard more clearly if I played in low register. If there was no string bass player in the group, my choice to play bass lines was appreciated, because it filled a hole in the overall music. I discovered that I could retune the guitar and make the low E into a D. That

gave me easy fingerings for octave notes on the 6th and 4th strings, somewhat like a Mexican Mariachi Guitarron. I could play bass lines in octaves, and be clearly heard, even with an un-amplified instrument. As a creative improviser, I did not always want to settle for the low register and the mindset of a bass player. When I wanted to do something in a higher register, I looked to copy and interact with melodic lines that the other players were offering. If I answered a partner's line, it would sometimes become the start of a duet exchange within the overall quartet. If I could listen carefully enough to anticipate and exactly match what a partner was doing, that motif became more prominent in the overall sound.

The un-amplified acoustic guitar is a soft and subtle instrument. Sometimes a group of improvisers would notice the dynamic limitations of the guitar and choose to lower their playing level to meet the guitar in a softer place. Then I could improvise anywhere on the instrument, and have the lead lines be heard and responded to. And if the energy built and the volume of the group evolved to a level that the guitar could not match, I had options. I could switch to bass register, support a mid or high register line from another player by doubling it with my voice, I could support the overall sound with plucked or strummed chords, or I could drop out and listen for the next opportunity to contribute.

Music for People has been a great “playground” for learning to improvise and to take risks in a supportive environment. As a bass player wanna-be, there have been times I placed myself in playing situations that were above my ability level, just for the challenge. There are two experiences that stand out in memory, both duets with pianists.

Jonathan Best is a wild man on piano. His musical influences range from ragtime to zulu; he has spent time touring much of the US and he has done admirable cultural exchange work in Africa. He plays piano in a percussive, highly expressive way that is explosively fast and loud. I can recall one solo of his on a grand piano when the wheels of the piano carrier were not locked, and he chased the piano across the stage as he played. For an electric bass player (as I was at the time), playing with Jonathan posed issues of coordination. I knew I was going to be following more than leading, and I was going to have to be prepared to play at his speed and energy level. This is playing in a place beyond keys, scales and modes. It is more like babbling than anything else. He said something, as fast and as loud as he could, using the whole 88 keys of the piano, and I went along with him, babbling on the bass, matching his speed with articulated notes that I could not name. The stops and starts were sudden, and I was seeking to lock in on the phrases as they formed, so we did not leave each other hanging. How fast could I play up and down with my thumb? How exactly could I play chromatic lines in my left hand? I sometimes played shapes on the fingerboard, like Xs that gave me atonal contrasts and arpeggiated runs. And when it was over, we had gone for an exhilarating sprint. I was somewhat fearful throughout that I would not be able to keep up, but if I needed to rest my hand so as to not drag the beat, I dropped out for a bit. The silence was an artistic contrast in the music, and it gave me a needed breather from Jonathan's breakneck pace of playing.

As wild as Johnathan Best can play, that's how mellow Benjamin Smith is on piano. Ben's world is jazz, and his voicings on piano are rich and deeply resonant. When I stepped up to play a duet with Ben on electric bass, I knew my role would be to craft a melodic line that could link his chords together. While playing with Johnathan was a physical challenge for my fingers, playing with Ben was an activity in deep listening, staying connected as much as possible so I could play what I otherwise would have been singing.

Improvising from my home base.

I am a guitar player. I was lucky to be a teenager in the era of classic rock music, and a preteen for the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. I saw the connection between the American Roots music as interpreted by the Kingston Trio (Tom Dooley) and by Woodie Guthrie (This Land is Your Land) and the way American rhythm and blues came back to the USA as interpreted by the Beatles (You've Really Got a Hold on Me, Twist and Shout). Song form is still my favorite style of music.

### Loopers and Samplers

As one person, at home with a guitar, how can I expand as an improviser? It is only possible on guitar to play one "part" at a time. If I put my energy into playing a chord progression, I cannot readily also solo (although some great pickers can manage to do both at the same time, it is beyond us mortals). About ten years ago, digital memory storage became a quick enough process that you could capture what you played in real time using a sampling pedal (e.g.- Jam Man, Loop Station, Echoplex). Let's assume for a minute that you are not a rock and roll band alumnus, and you have no experience with guitar amplifiers and effects pedals. If you do have such experience, bear with me a moment.

Loopers, or digital samplers, will "capture" and replay any sound that occurs between time A and time B. They typically use a foot pedal to set the starting event and the ending event, and they can be adjusted to capture and save a sound or to capture, save and repeat a sound. The difference is that a captured sound can be replayed on demand just once, or it can be replayed over and over in rhythm. The ability of loopers to capture and repeat sounds makes them "smart metronomes."

How can a non-techie use a looper? Consider what engineers call the "signal chain." A sound made by any acoustic instrument starts the chain. That sound can be grabbed by any microphone, which converts the sound waves in the air into magnetic signals going to the other end of the microphone cable. That sound can be heard if we plug the microphone into an amplifier with a speaker, for example any guitar amplifier or PA system. Now we will put the looper into this chain, in between the microphone and the amplifier.

To start with, let's just sing a long note, and while we are singing, tap the looper pedal once to start recording. We keep singing and recording for five seconds, then we hit the looper pedal again to stop recording. Some loopers will automatically begin repeating the five captured seconds of sound in an endless repeating loop.

Some loopers are also mixers. That is, there is circuitry in the looper that will allow you to adjust the amount of live sound and looped sound signal that goes out of the looper to the amplifier. If we recorded five seconds of singing a steady tone, that sound will now be repeating over and over, with barely a click to mark where the sample begins and ends. We could sing in harmony with this steady tone, or use it as a drone note and improvise melodies. Whatever we sing into the microphone will come out the amplifier.

Some loopers will allow us to record more parts by tapping the pedals to start and stop our sampling. We could sing a one steady harmony tone, add it to the loop, then add another and another. The limits of how many tones and how long a sample we can record are determined by the amount of digital memory that is in the looper's hardware.

Now consider the rhythmic uses of a looper. I sing a rhythmic phrase into the mic: doop-doop-dedoop-doo. I tap the pedal on the downbeat of the phrase and again on the downbeat when the phrase would repeat. The phrase is now captured, and it repeats, in rhythm (if I was accurate in tapping the pedal with good timing). I can improvise over this rhythmic phrase. If I tap the pedal again, I can add a cross-rhythm: do-dit, do-dit, do-dit, (rest). Now two rhythmic parts are repeating. This has the regularity of a metronome, but the interest level of a live musician. Let's unplug the mic and plug an electric guitar into the looper. Now whatever I play on the guitar I can capture with the looper. If I build a song in pop or rock music style, I can start with a bass line. Once the bass line is captured and repeating, I can add a rhythm part in strummed chords. Then I can add a lead line, and perhaps harmonize the lead line. I can use the looper to create layered music, and I can listen for the "holes" in the music. Then I can experiment with what to play to fill the holes. If I like what I hear, I can capture it by tapping the pedal to add the new part. Some loopers will allow me to undo a saved part if I am unhappy with it, so I can try again.

What loopers can't do is mix the parts after they have been captured. The volume levels are generally not adjustable. Because of their limitations, Loopers are not likely to replace recording studios. But as a practice tool for improvisation, loopers are valuable for their flexibility and immediacy.

The dimensions of improvisational competence

I would love to be able to improvise like the people I just watched. What skills do I need and where can I learn them?

Fluency – immediacy of expression, going from impulse to manifested sound on your instrument.

Responsiveness – sensitive and active listening; ability to match a partner (shadowing)

Playfulness – interacting via imitation, call and echo, call and answer

Unselfishness – ability to be attentively silent; to support a weaker player

Boldness – the willingness to play beyond what is familiar; to lead others; to take risks

Non-attachment – the ability to release criticism and other distractions; to stay in the present moment

Transparency – access to authentic emotions

Showmanship – knowing what will affect your audience; comfort playing in public

Many people learn to play music mechanically. They read notes on the page without deep emotional connection to what they are playing. Such music can be soul-less; a bit like reading nonsense syllables that are pronounced like English but don't mean anything. Some people play what moves them with feeling, but they have difficulty leaving the "bubble" of their own musical world. They find it hard to anticipate the ways other people improvise. Listen. Your eyes close and perhaps turn up inside your lids. Without the distraction of the visual world, small sounds emerge. A sonic world emerges, with its own sparse texture: the upclose whirr of the computer fan; the distant radio from the room down the hall; the traffic passing outside; the creaks and groans of the heating pipes and floor boards. Our visual world is dense with detail; our sonic world is far less populated.

Imitate.

When we are new to reading, we move our lips when we read. There is a process of hearing the words as though we were saying them ourselves. This holds until the process of reading becomes more neurologically integrated and automatic. So it can be with music. Imitate what you are listening to, whether it is a mechanical sound or a song on the radio. Let your listening become active, as you engage your body in copying what you are hearing. Balance the levels so you hear yourself and your sound source clearly. Hum along. If the tune or the sound is unfamiliar and unpracticed, so much the better. It will keep you in spontaneous place, continuously reacting to what you hear.

In my improv class, one of the activities we learn early in the semester is to shadow a partner. It works this way: let's say you and I are going to be partners for this exercise. You start by standing up and facing me. Then you look at me, in a "hello" sort of way, just making a connection. You take a breath and start to sing a made-up melody. If we are beginners at this, keep the melody simple. Something that changes notes slowly and has small steps rather than big leaps. You just sing while looking at me, that's your whole job right now. What I do is this: I look at you, and I listen as closely as I can. As you sing, I sing along. When you shift notes, I adjust to the new note as best as I can. If I get the pitches correct, I also attempt to match your timbre and expressiveness. I breathe when you breathe. I am your "shadow," going wherever you go. We do that for a few short melodies of yours. Then we switch roles. I look at you, I take a breath, and I start to sing. I keep it simple, and I may even make some small gesture if my next note is going up or down, just to make the process more user-friendly.

What good is shadowing?

Let's move from this duet activity into a free improv quartet. Yourself and three other players. It's your imagination at work here, so imagine three other melody instruments that you really like to listen to. If you gravitate to harmonically complex instruments like guitar or piano, let's simplify them for this exercise. Guitarists are only playing a lead line, and pianists are only playing one note at a time. The improvisation starts, and for a while you fit in OK playing whatever spontaneously comes to you. Then for some reason you hit a blank patch in your creative flow. No ideas are coming. You fall silent. You may even begin talking to yourself, perhaps kindly and perhaps critically. Stop the inner dialog. Just listen to your partners. One of them is playing something interesting. You transition from attentive listening to active listening when you begin to shadow their sounds. The group of

players reacts to your contribution. This works well, and all you did was listen and imitate. Simplicity is good.

You are improvising alone at home. You can hear a certain phrase in your head, but you don't know how to automatically play the phrase on your instrument. You break down the phrase and sing just the first few notes. Then you find the first of those notes on your instrument. You sing the phrase again, and play the first note and one or two notes more. You are learning how to have your fingers shadow your voice. This is a great path to musical fluency.