

MUO 280 (0197-280-001)  
**Improvisation Ensemble**  
Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. James Oshinsky

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Office Hours: M 3-4 pm

Time: Monday & Wednesday 4:15-5:30 pm

Location: PAC 006

**COURSE DESCRIPTION** This is a course in musical improvisation without stylistic boundaries. Students will develop skills in free and structured improvisation in a variety of styles through performance (using their own instrument or voice), listening, and discussion, supplemented by reading about improvisation and group facilitation. The ability to read music is not required.

**COURSE GOALS** Students will:

Learn a variety of techniques for solo and ensemble improvisation in several musical styles.

Become familiar with concepts and terminology associated with music improvisation.

Develop an understanding of improvisation and its role in music education and society at large.

Explore alternative ways of making music.

Inquire into their own creative process to see what supports it and what stifles it.

Learn to facilitate music improvisation experiences in an encouraging way.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES** Students will:

Participate in warm-ups and group facilitation exercises that foster improvisation skills.

Collaborate in group improvisations.

Gain skills in solo improvisation.

Learn how to give useful and constructive feedback to peers and students in supportive language.

Become familiar with internet-based samples and Apps that promote improvisational music making. Individually design and develop a final improvisation project.

Perform and facilitate during a final public concert of improvisations.

### COURSE EXPECTATIONS & REQUIREMENTS

**TEXTS and MATERIALS** There are two texts you are required to buy or lease for this course, one highly recommended text, and a variety of written and auditory materials that will be posted on the Moodle page for the class. *The Listening Book* (highly recommended), *The Music Lesson* (required) and *Drum Circle Facilitation* (required) are available at the Adelphi bookstore. The Moodle page for the class has other texts and resources that you do not have to buy, but your experience in the class will be deeper if you choose to listen to or read them. Posted on Moodle is an additional text (*Return to Child*), written by the instructor. It contains descriptions of many of the class activities and instructions for leading the activities. There are also music-minus-one audio files to practice with (*Flight*), links to websites promoting improvisation, and listening examples of improvisation techniques (*The Darling Conversations*). Other Moodle modules cover technical topics such as using loopers/digital samplers, educational topics such as classroom applications of group improvisation, and therapeutic uses of music. You will need to have regular access to the Moodle page for class announcements and updates.

### ATTENDANCE and PARTICIPATION

*Show Up; Pay Attention to what has Heart and Meaning; Tell The Truth without Judgment or Blame; Be Open to Outcome but Not Attached to Outcome.*

– Angeles Arrien, *The Four-Fold Way*

Attendance at each class session is mandatory. Students are expected to be in class on time and ready to play their instrument. Coming early is encouraged; there are interesting new instruments to experiment with, chances to jam in small groups, and of course help with set up is always appreciated. play any music of your choice.

Being prepared for class involves both in-class and between-class preparations. In-class preparation includes bringing your instrument (already tuned) and your readiness to play, listen, and comment sensitively. Between-class preparation involves completing the week's readings, writing logs or short papers when requested, and practicing improvisation. But if you follow the philosophy of the class, you will not “practice;” you will *play* spontaneously and listen with a forgiving and appreciative ear.

During our meetings you will be expected to make spontaneous music in solo, ensemble and whole group settings, and share your honest reactions in constructive and supportive language. You will also have opportunities to lead the group in improvisation activities. When you are not actively playing or leading you are expected to be actively listening. The use of cell phones is strictly prohibited during class. These devices must be turned off or switched to silent mode as a courtesy to your classmates and the instructor.

**ABSENCE POLICY** The bulk of your grade will be derived from class participation. It may be possible, with the instructor's advance permission, to *make up two missed classes* by completing outside assignments equal in time to the class time missed. *Missing more than two classes* (even with make-ups) will result in a lowering of your class grade by one half letter grade (for example, B to B minus). If you must miss a class, or if you will be late for a class for any reason, it is good etiquette to call the instructor before class time so he knows whether or not to expect you.

#### ASSIGNMENTS

1. Attend every class, including the final concert and wrap-up session during finals week.
2. Participate actively in musical and leadership activities in class.
3. Complete any assigned readings ahead of class time.
4. Complete one honest and thorough course evaluation.

#### SCHEDULE

Class starts: Wednesday, January 26

No classes: March 14 or 16

Midterm: Wednesday, March 9

Final Concert: Wednesday May 4 (tentative)

Final class meeting: between May 12-19, TBA

#### GRADING & EVALUATION (please refer to the Rubric of Improvisation and Facilitation Skills on Moodle)

In-class participation, preparation, contribution, and involvement	60%
Midterm: group project and in-class performance	20%
Final: individual project and public performance	20%

There are three areas of competence to be assessed in this class, namely: 1) solo improvisation, 2) ensemble improvisation, and 3) leading improvisation activities. Each of these areas plays a role in the final grading process. To get an A in the course, excellence and competence has to be demonstrated in two of these three areas (the student may choose which two). Assessment is based mainly on in-class observation of musicianship, leadership and scholarship from class attendance and participation; this is combined with the level of compliance with assigned readings and exercises, and the competencies shown during the midterm and final performances.

**CONSULTATIONS** Students in this class may come from a broad variety of musical backgrounds – music education, music performance, and non-music majors; classical, jazz, rock, R&B, and folk genres; people pursuing music as a profession, as a recreational activity, or as a diversion from academic routine. Each person will be graded in part according to their own personal goals for the course. To this end, it is essential for the student and instructor to communicate regularly during the semester about the student's level of involvement with the course activities. It is strongly recommended that the student consult with the instructor a few times during the semester. A consult can be a short face to face meeting, a phone call, or a video session during which improvisation coaching can take place.

**MIDTERM and FINAL** The “exams” in this class are opportunities to show what you have learned in the class. The Midterm will be an improvisation “concert” for class members only. The Final will be an all-improvised concert that is open to friends, faculty and guests. The instructor will facilitate the Midterm; the class members will take a larger role in the leadership, sequence and flow of the Final concert.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY** All students are expected to abide by the University's Honor Code: "The University is an academic community devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. Fundamental to this pursuit is academic integrity. In joining the Adelphi Community, I accept the University's Statement of Academic Integrity and pledge to uphold the principles of honesty and civility embodied in it. I will conduct myself in accordance with ideals of truth and honesty and I will forthrightly oppose actions which would violate these ideals."

**DISABILITY SUPPORT** Students with disabilities are encouraged to speak to the professor about accommodations they may need to produce an accessible learning environment.

**COMMUNICATION** Please make sure to check your Adelphi email account regularly. Class announcements (such as assignment deadlines, revisions to assignments, and concert details) will be sent to Adelphi email accounts. If you have a private account, arrange for your Adelphi email to be forwarded automatically so you do not miss any crucial information, or be sure to give your preferred email address to the instructor. Unless there is a major public power outage (such as Hurricane Sandy) affecting your access to a computer, it is expected you will keep current about class news shared through Adelphi email or Moodle notifications. When communicating with the professor, please send emails to his personal email address listed at the top of this syllabus. If there are assigned papers, please convert them to PDF format before you send them via email – this assures they can be read on any device or operating system.

#### DEFINITIONS

A **Consult** is a brief one-to-one conversation with the instructor about your progress in the class. It can be scheduled in person, on the phone, or via video chat (Skype, Face Time). The instructor is available to coach you in improvisation, play duets, and to assist your integration of improvisation activities into your teaching, your performing, or your recreational playing.

A **Reaction Paper** is a well-organized, thoughtful, edited and spell-checked paper of 500-1000 words. It is designed to serve two purposes: to verify that you have read the two main required books, and to find out in what ways you have found the books to be useful and worthwhile. It is not a research paper, and it should not be a literal reporting of the book's content. Your opinions and reactions about the book's readability, accessibility, and applicability to your musical life should comprise the bulk of your paper. Papers may be submitted in hard copy or electronically if they are in PDF format. **A reaction paper is one way to make up the time for a missed class.**

A **Recording** can be made on a smart phone, a home computer, a digital camera, or a dedicated audio recording device. Recordings can be submitted **in mp3 format** on a memory stick or a disc, they can be attached to an email to the instructor, or they can be posted to a website such as SoundCloud, Dropbox or MacJams. Video recordings can be posted privately on YouTube. Please email the instructor at the same time that you post your recording so he knows where to find it and when it is available to be viewed or heard. To be considered on time, recordings must be submitted prior to or during class time. **A recording is one way to make up the time for a missed class.**

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Wooten, Victor. *The Music Lesson*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006. (required)
- Hull, Arthur. *Drum Circle Facilitation*. Santa Cruz: Village Music Circles, 2006. (required)
- Oshinsky, James. *Return to Child*. Goshen: Music for People, 2008. (required; on Moodle)
- Mathieu, Allaudin. *The Listening Book*. Boston: Shambala, 1991. (highly recommended)
- Green, Barry. *Bringing Music to Life*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2009.
- Hale, Susan Elizabeth. *Song and Silence*. Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 1995.
- Knysh, Mary and Bevan, Betsy. *BoomDoPa*. Bloomsburg: Rhythmic Connections, 2000. (on Moodle)
- Lieberman, Julie Lyonn. *Planet Musician*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1998.
- Sobol, Elise. *An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2008.
- Faulkner, Simon. *Rhythm to Recovery*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2016.
- Treece, Roger. *Circlesongs- The Method*. [rogetreece.com/books-scores](http://rogetreece.com/books-scores), 2015.
- Miller, Lynn. *SpiritArts – Transformation Through Creating Art, Music and Dance*. Phoenixville: Expressive Therapy Press, 2013.

Audio files on Moodle:

Rhiannon. *Flight*. (Interactive Guide to Vocal Improvisation) Boulder: Sounds True, 2000.

Darling, David and Weber, Julie. *The Darling Conversations*. Manifest Spirit Music, 2007.

Wooten, Victor. *The Music Lesson*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006. (excerpts read by the author)

Required books ISBN numbers:

The Music Lesson by Victor Wooten

print 978-0-425-22093-1

mp3/CD 978-1-4001-6817-0

Drum Circle Facilitation by Arthur Hull

0-9724307-1-7

The Listening Book by Allaudin Mathieu

0-87773-610-3

Return to Child by James Oshinsky

978-163173445-8

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Wooten, Victor. *The Music Lesson*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006.

This may be the best book on musicianship I have ever come across. In the style of Carlos Casteneda, the device of this book involves an ordinary working jazz/rock bass player who is visited by characters with supernatural powers. These abilities have to do with the fundamentals of music, from time and pace to tone and ensemble awareness. They are taught through experiences in nature and in honing mindfulness, which makes this a book about personal as well as musical development. It is a very engaging read.

Mathieu, Allaudin. *The Listening Book*. Boston: Shambala, 1991.

Mathieu, a composer and author of Harmonic Experience, suggests a variety of activities and practices for refining one's listening as a path to deeper personal engagement in music. This is the kind of book where you can open to any page randomly and find a gem.

Hull, Arthur. *Drum Circle Facilitation*. Santa Cruz: Village Music Circles, 2006.

No one has done more than Hull in the area of articulating the mindset needed to conduct large group rhythm experiences, from classrooms to arenas. His book is filled with personal anecdotes of his successes and train wrecks, and his codification of rhythm activities and leadership skills is comprehensive and clear.

Hull, Arthur. *Rhythmic Alchemy Playshop Volume #1: Drum Circle Games*. Santa Cruz: Village Music Circles, 2013.

This book contains the group games Hull most often uses in his workshops, along with a DVD for illustrating how to lead them. The three types of games are Agreement games, with preset rules; Facilitated games, where a leader interacts or directs during the game, and Orchestrational games, where the leadership role shifts from person to person during the game.

Green, Barry. *Bringing Music to Life*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2009.

A classical bassist and author of *The Inner Game of Music*, in this book Green talks about his own path to improvisation through the teachings of cellist David Darling and the organization Music for People. The instructor's book, *Return to Child*, is referenced often in this volume.

Oshinsky, James. *Return to Child*. Goshen: Music for People, 2008.

Teaching improvisation can be approached as an improvisation. The skills for participating in solo, small ensemble and large group improvisations are presented in the first chapters, with specific mention of instrument categories (strings, piano, drums) and musical styles. The middle chapters address the mindset of the leader and the common challenges of teaching improvisation to mixed groups. The final section of the book covers ways of bringing improvisation into classrooms.

Knysh, Mary and Bevan, Betsy. *BoomDoPa*. Bloomsburg: Rhythmic Connections, 2000.

A book of improvisation-based rhythm games for the school music classroom. It emphasizes hand drum techniques and the use of plastic Boomwhackers.

Knysh, Mary. *Innovative Drum Circles: Beyond Beat into Harmony*. Millville: Rhythmic Connections, 2013. A book of improvisation-based activities for school music classrooms and adult workshops. The activities transition from rhythm-only to rhythmic melodic and rhythmic harmonic skills. This is a way to build more layers of musicianship while keeping the accessibility of rhythm as a starting point for group improvisation.

Lieberman, Julie Lyonn. *Planet Musician*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1998.  
Violinist Lieberman describes how to capture the essence of a variety of world music styles.

Hale, Susan Elizabeth. *Song and Silence*. Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 1995.  
A book about the uses of the voice in music therapy, personal expression, and musical performance.

Sobol, Elise. *An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2008. The title is very descriptive. The author is a strong advocate for addressing the needs of Special Education students in mainstream school settings and is an excellent trainer of teachers.

Rhiannon. *Flight* (Interactive Guide to Vocal Improvisation). Boulder: Sounds True, 2000.  
Rhiannon (no last name) is a long time member of Bobby McFerrin's performing ensemble. This 2 CD set is a music-minus-one class in vocal improvisation that invites you to sing along and make up your own parts to the ensemble's vocal grooves.

Rhiannon. *Vocal River: The Skill and Spirit of Improvisation*. Hawaii: Rhiannon Music, 2013. This book has Rhiannon's biography as well as the vocal activities she most often uses in her jazz-oriented vocal improvisation workshops.

Darling, David and Weber, Julie. *The Darling Conversations*. Manifest Spirit Music, 2007.  
Cellist David Darling and educator/composer Julie Weber discuss a humanistic approach to music improvisation that encourages the musical impulse in all people and expresses a philosophy that all combinations of people, instruments, and experience levels can make music together. The 3 CD set contains numerous examples of small ensemble improvisation techniques, based on Darling's work with the organization, Music for People.

Faulkner, Simon. *Rhythm to Recovery*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2016.  
Simon Faulkner is a pioneer in using drum circle activities to promote pro-social awareness and actions in at-risk populations such as delinquent youth and incarcerated adults. His work, sponsored by the government of Australia, is meticulously researched and verified. The activities are accessible and practical, fun and engaging. The therapeutic metaphors that accompany the activities are brilliant.

Treece, Roger. *Circlesongs – The Method*. This is the method for group vocal improvisation taught at the workshops of Bobby McFerrin and his colleagues. The book contains three audio CDs with examples of vocal improv exercises and circlesongs created by Mr. Treece and his workshop attendees.

Miller, Lynn. *SpiritArts*. Lynn is a long-time colleague of David Darling and is adept at describing his vocal and instrumental improvisation activities. But she is also a dancer, a visual artist and a shamanic healer. Her book integrates the various improvisational modalities for the purpose of personal transformation and healing.

Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005.

## GRADING CRITERIA for the Improvisation Ensemble

### Overall criteria

1. Show Up – attendance is required at every session. The class is based on gaining supervised experience with improvisation. While you can practice skills outside of class, you cannot learn the skills just by reading about them or watching YouTube videos. This class is about YOU making YOUR OWN music, alone and in groups. You have to be in class to do this. Class participation grades will weight attendance heavily. If you play an instrument, be sure to bring it to class. Showing up means being in class on time, with an open mind, with your instrument ready (reeds soaked, strings tuned, drum heads tightened, amp cords working, etc.). It also means keeping up when there are assigned readings so you can participate in the academic discussions about improvisation. Another aspect of showing up is taking the risks necessary to learn new things in the areas of improvisation and group leading. Go for it!

2. Pay Attention to What Has Heart and Meaning – the class will involve both playing and listening to others play. Give your classmates your full attention, and look for what you can learn from their examples. Notice your own tendencies to judge others; it will illuminate ways you also may judge yourself.

3. Tell the Truth Without Judgment or Blame – when you give feedback to your peers, consider the risks they have taken to play for you, and respond with both accuracy and compassion. We are aiming for a level of feedback that sustains an encouraging atmosphere. Take responsibility for whatever sounds you may not enjoy without telling anyone “that sucked.” If an improvisation or ensemble did not go well, find ways of inquiring and commenting that will keep the players wanting to try again.

4. Be Open to Outcome but Not Attached to Outcome – improvisations are inherently unpredictable. Allow yourself to be surprised, to respond in new ways, to open new ways of listening, and to feel and express things you may not have felt before. Let go of expectations for yourself and your colleagues. Improvisation requires you to cultivate a state of being in the moment. This can be valuable in many areas of your life outside of music.

(- these four criteria are taken from the book *The Four-Fold Way* by Angeles Arrien)

#### GRADING CRITERIA for presentations and performances

When I “grade” the improvisations you perform in class, I will be using the criteria below. Remember that I am crediting the risks you take as well as the results. There is no need to “play it safe” to avoid mistakes. Playing at the edge of your ability level will teach you the most. When I “grade” the academic portion of class participation, I am mainly interested in the effort you make to read the assigned materials and implement the activities they describe, along with the ways you integrate the class content into your musical life and the ways you teach others.

#### Musical presentations

Did the student play spontaneously rather than play pre-learned parts? Did the student employ the elements of music (sound and silence, pitch and harmony, pulse and rhythm, tone and contrast, listening and responsiveness)? Did the student “play well with others?” Did the student show flexibility and appropriateness in taking on solo and support roles? Did the student help his or her peers sound better? Was the student’s playing competent? Was there adequate intonation and control of timbre, volume, and timing? Did the student play with soul and feeling rather than mechanically?

#### Group Leadership

One of the essential elements of this class is the improvisational aspect of teaching, including the teaching of improvisation. When you lead segments of the class or the concerts, I will be looking for the following:

Did the student lead with enthusiasm? Were the activities chosen appropriate for the target group? Was the student able to communicate the gist of each activity clearly and with a minimum of talking? Was the student able to sequence activities that flowed well? Was the student flexible in using what was given by the group?

#### Academic presentations / class discussion

Did the student show evidence of completing the assigned reading, listening, viewing or recording? Was the student able to demonstrate comprehension of the material through paraphrase and the capacity to communicate the content clearly to others? Was the student able to adapt the course content to a specific school-age population, instrument group, or ensemble setting?

## RECORDING PROJECTS

(these may be used to make up the time if you miss a class)

Record yourself doing the following:

1. a one minute vocal solo improvisation
2. a one minute instrumental solo improvisation (if your main instrument is voice, you can make one improv mainly melodic and the other mainly rhythmic)
3. one minute of melodic soloing (improv) over a steady drone
4. one minute of rhythmic soloing over a steady beat
5. one minute of duet improvisation using solo/drone (described in *Return to Child*)
6. one minute of duet improvisation using solo/ostinato (described in *Return to Child*)
7. going “off the page” - play the beginning of a piece you know well on your instrument, then morph it into an improvisation (total playing time: two minutes or more)
8. “the claw / small changes” - using one hand on a piano or keyboard, play one finger at a time in order, changing one note every third or fourth repetition (total playing time: two minutes or more) (*described in Return to Child*)

These recordings can be done using your smart phone, computer, or dedicated recording device. **Each recording should begin with your voice, announcing who you are and which exercise you are doing.** The recordings should be **saved as mp3s**, so they can be turned in on a memory stick, burned to CD, uploaded to Sound Cloud, Dropbox or Macjams, posted on the class Moodle page or emailed to the instructor.

The more you record and listen to your improvisations, the faster you can develop as an improviser. If you wish to make additional recordings and submit them for feedback, you are welcome to.