

Original Art, Original Writing, Original Music – Making Room for Improvisation in School Music

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Music teachers have a hard job. They are beholden to their departments and districts to deliver an expected curriculum of content, provide instruction on a variety of instruments, prepare students for local music competitions, and curate seasonal programs of public performances. How they go about doing that leaves little room for student individuality and creativity. In the course of teaching historical and culturally important music, the creative side of student musicianship can get neglected.

There are large and significant differences between how visual art and creative writing are taught and how music is taught in K-12 schools. Every child, from kindergarten through high school, comes home with original artwork and original writing. We encourage students to write and illustrate their stories without telling them what to draw or what narratives to follow. And in music classes? Students learn to read from printed pages and rarely learn how to make and preserve their own music until the most advanced music classes in high school. While we value social coordination and cooperative learning, students rarely learn how to combine their instrumental and social skills to make spontaneous improvised music with peers. Improvisation in solo and group settings seems to be a missing element of music education, even though all composition begins as improvisation. For language learning, we listen, then speak, then read, then write. In music learning, our education system has modified this order in ways that disrupt the development of expressing musical ideas fluently and socially.

It can be costly to neglect improvisation as an area of instruction. The listening skills that are awakened when improvising are essential components of musicianship when playing written music in solo and ensemble situations. Not coincidentally, improvisation skills are essential components of socialization and self-esteem as well. Every verbal conversation is an improvisation. Learning to skillfully listen and appropriately speak one's mind is emotionally healthy in words, in artistic images, and in music.

There are ways to address the relative absence of improvisation instruction. On the basis of our experience as teachers of music improvisation to adults and children, in this article we offer ideas and activities to integrate improvisation skills into large and small ensemble settings within the existing structures of public-school music. The potential benefits are many. We often hear teachers' anecdotes and testimonials about the positive transformations they have experienced from allowing improvisation into their musical lives.

We are not seeking to provide a complete improvisation education in one short sitting; however we can offer some entry points that build on common class practices. For example, teachers have the most flexibility to modify instruction at the opening and closing of their classes. We expect the bulk of their time will likely be spent on either curriculum delivery

or practice related to performances. But relatively small changes to the ways classes open and close can provide experience with improvisation that can improve listening, strengthen a sense of ensemble, and also satisfy mandates to address improvisation skills as a state arts standard. Improvisation can lead to more intensely emotional sounds, more social connection, and better attunement to support musical themes and statements when the students are performing written music. In other words, improvisation supports emotional literacy, social bonding, and empathic responses to musical expressions. You may recognize these as key elements of Social Emotional Learning, which music improvisation is especially suited to address in non-threatening ways. For a more detailed discussion of the SEL elements of improvisation learning experiences, there is a chapter in *Simple and Daring*, a collection of essays by the authors, that presents the social emotional components of lessons in improvisation from kindergarten through adult level.

What Improvisation Experiences Can You Build into the Openings of Your Classes?

In most ensemble rehearsals, the first activity is tuning. The group receives a reliable reference note, and each player makes his or her own individual adjustments to attune to a common tone. It is likely that some of the players are improvising while tuning – they are free to explore whatever notes they can produce. Some run through scales, some play passages from familiar pieces, and some just make stuff up. If the teacher’s goal is to increase the amount of student improvising, tuning presents a perfect opportunity.

Another way of conceptualizing the reference note that groups use for tuning is to think of it as a drone note. Drones are common in the music of India and Gaelic countries, where there are specific instruments dedicated just to providing an atmospheric drone. The music takes place with a constant ongoing drone as part of its mood and tonality. (e.g. – bagpipes).

The simplest way to capitalize on the usefulness of a drone note is to extend the tuning period by a few minutes and encouraging more free exploration. To take the pressure of “soloing” away from this suggestion to explore, one can call it “noodling,” or any other term that connotes playfulness. If your ensemble has 40 members, divide them so that half are joining in on the drone note (in any octave), and half are noodling. Let them “noodle” for a few minutes, or about four or five breaths. Then switch which half of the group is holding the drone note and which half gets to noodle. For a smooth transition, designate the halves of the group before you start tuning. Give your normal reference note, allow tuning as usual, then bring half of the group into unison on the reference note while the other half noddles. After the first noodling period, bring the whole group back to the reference note by gesture. There is no need to stop the group and restart, which would interrupt the momentum of the activity. Then the second half of the group noddles while the first half provides the drone. Bring the group to unison and for variety, conduct some dynamic variations, all on the drone note. Go very loud and very soft before picking an ending point, either whisper quiet or booming loud.

If your normal practice is to begin rehearsals with scales, try dividing your group in half and singing or playing scales over a drone note. Be sure to switch the groups so that each half has the chance to be the drone. Then divide the group in thirds. One third holds a drone note, one third plays scales following the leader's conducting, and one third is free to "noodle" over the scales. There will likely be some very interesting harmonies and counter melodies generated. Once again, be sure to switch up the groups so that each section gets to be the drone, the scale, and the noodlers. For smooth transitions, bring the whole group back to a unison drone before shifting roles.

The Value of Call and Response

To introduce more rhythmic variations into this activity, start with vocal call and response over a drone note. Divide your group in half. Have half of the group join the reference note you use for tuning and sustain that note as a drone. Have the other half of the group echo you as you give them rhythmic calls in call-and-response fashion. Give them simple calls at first, then give them more challenging calls as their listening skills permit. Bring the whole group back to the drone and switch the group roles. Give new calls to the second half of the group.

At the next level of complexity, give the group a signal for repeating a call over and over as a loop. Start out as before, with half the group holding a drone note. Give a few calls to the other half of the group and have them repeat one of the calls as a loop. When they are secure in repeating the loop in rhythm, select a subgroup to be the new call and response section. Give this new section a few calls to repeat. You will have three parts going – a drone section, a repeating loop section, and a call and response section. Turn one of your calls into a loop to add a new layer to the sound. Lastly, ask for volunteer soloists to improvise over the piece you have created. Once you and your group are comfortable with these roles – drone, call and response, loop, and solo, you can combine them in a great variety of ways. You can also invite students to give calls and create loops once they have understood the structures.

To make the above activity work with instruments, the calls have to be simple enough for the players to imitate them accurately without too much struggle. Start with calls of only a few notes in familiar scales or include the note names in the call itself. The idea is to make sure the students are successful.

You can borrow terms from the drum circle community and call the students holding the drone "homers" and the ones noodling "roamers." If you adapt this activity for smaller groups, you can present this in duet format: one person holds a drone while their partner roams, making up melodies. When the roaming is over, the roamer holds the last note, creating a new drone. Now the homer becomes the roamer. Let the duet exchange roles a few times, and progress into an open duet improvisation. This activity can also be done in rhythmic format, in which the soloists end with a looped melody in place of a drone.

At the closing of class sessions and rehearsals, there are often announcements and bustling chaos as instruments are stored and students head off to their next classes. One can make announcements more salient and memorable by using call and response to support the content. For example, at rehearsal's end, start a pulse using body percussion or foot taps. Give a rhythmic call that the group will answer. Make the calls accessible and work up to calls that challenge their listening and repeating skills. Embed announcement information in the calls. Call: Wednesday the 16th (group repeats); During 3rd period (group repeats); Band trip sign up (group repeats); What's the day? (Wednesday the 16th); When do you come? (During 3rd period); Why are you here? (Band trip sign up).

Vocal and Instrumental Tone Clusters

Every improvisation starts with a single note. One simple improvisation game is structured like this: every player prepares and breathes together, and on the exhale, comes out with their own unique note. The aim of the activity is to not change the notes, no matter how discordant they sound. Just like soundtracks that create atmospheric moods, the tone clusters will have their own unique energy. The tensions that may be created out of the unplanned chaos of random notes are a good thing. Because when you repeat the activity with another breath, the group will adjust when they independently choose new notes. They may go for more tension, or more harmoniousness. But either way, it is part of a process of group attunement and unconscious consensus. Each singer or player is improvising their one note, without the pressure of having to “solo,” or chain many notes together.

The group can also play these tone clusters with whatever energy the leader's body language communicates. By facial expression and gesture, the leader can conduct sounds that are soft, tentative, blaring, angry, ecstatic, surprised, etc. As the “splashes” of sound are repeated, different clusters will emerge each time.

If a teacher wanted to capitalize on the social-emotional metaphors inherent in this vocal exercise, they might use the language of ArtsEdSEL: the ability to have each person express his or her own unique note represents Identity; the blending of all of the tones together is a reflection of Belonging; and the ability to express a variety of emotions intentionally reflects Agency.

Improvisation in Small Ensembles

Some improvisation activities work well in lessons and rehearsals for smaller groups such as same-instrument sections. One small group improvisation form capitalizes on the way popular music uses looped patterns to create a platform for the song that follows. For this activity, you need four volunteers, each capable of holding an independent melodic pattern. The first player sets up a short repeating looped melody, like a bass line. The second player

adds a complimentary looped melody, which may take some coaching to find and refine. When the two patterns are established, the job of the third player is to exactly match one of the first two patterns, in harmony. Again, assist and coach to help make this successful, or allow the third person to play or sing in unison. The fourth player is free to solo over the pattern that has been created by the first three players. Make the pieces short and switch the roles so every player gets the chance to start something, to jump in with a complimentary melody, to support a part by harmonizing, and to stand out by soloing. You can find more vocal improvisation activities in the books and CDs of Rhiannon, one of the singers in Bobby McFerrin's "Voicestra."

Another small group activity is shadowing. This is an intensive listening game in which the group is set up as duets. One person in each pair makes up a slow-moving melody. Their partner's job is to exactly copy that melody, in real time, as they are hearing it. The key is to go slow and not try to fool your partner. The first player is improvising, and the second player is fully lending their voice to their partner's sounds. Be sure to have the players switch roles after a minute or two. Odd as it may seem, this activity works well with multiple duets of singers. They will be influenced by each other's melodies without consciously focusing on their neighbors.

Slow and simple improvisation is presented in a game called the Stately Dance. This works very well with winds and strings and can be done with voices as well. Player one repeatedly plays a short-long, short-long, rhythm on one single unchanging note. Player two then enters and plays the same rhythmic figure, but on a different note of their choosing. This creates a repeating interval, played in rhythm. Players three and four enter in turn until there are four notes in the cluster (more players can be included if necessary). After the last player enters, the first player changes his or her note, which changes the harmony of the cluster. This can be a very dramatic moment. Next, the second player makes a change in their note, all the while staying on an unchanging rhythmic figure, slow and stately. As the turns pass around the ensemble, each player changes their note, which affects the overall harmony. Various tensions and resolutions occur. For extensions of this activity, on the last round each player can take a short solo, ending by returning to the short-long rhythm. Or the group can trade solos and then open up into free improvisation as an ensemble.

Activities like Shadowing and Stately Dance are described in detail in the book "Return to Child," about the engaging approach to improvisation created by cellist David Darling.

Rhythm Jamming with Mixed Percussion

Perhaps the most accessible improvisation activities are the purely rhythmic forms that do not require mastery of pitch intonation or instrumental fluency. Rhythm activities naturally sound good on percussion instruments, from hand drums to shakers, wood blocks, bells, and rasps. But rhythm activities can also work with body percussion (taps, slaps, stomps,

claps, and pops), bucket drums, and any combination of tonal instruments played percussively.

The basic principle in leading percussion/rhythm activities is to allow the group's own listening to teach them how to make better and better music. This is the crux of drum circle facilitation as written about by Arthur Hull and others who teach Drum Circle Facilitation. However, in school settings, teachers may be concerned about giving their classes too much freedom, as it might lead to chaos. The remedy for this concern is to start by working with the group on ways to stop playing, and to do this in musical fashion.

Remedies for Chaos – musical ways to get the group to stop

The stop cut. In the stop cut, the group is actively engaged in jamming, sound making, or playing a rhythm. The leader gestures first to get the group's attention, by raising a hand or moving to a highly visible location. Then the leader counts down 4,3,2,1 stop! Each count is marked by the same number of fingers in the air. In addition, before the count of 1, the leader crosses his or her arms, so that on the word "stop!" the arms dramatically uncross. This looks like a baseball umpire calling a runner "safe!"

The rumble to a stop cut. Bring the group to a high energy state by encouraging all the players to go as fast as they can, until there is a large chaotic rumble of sound. This is not infinitely sustainable. Eventually, the players will want to stop. The leader can conduct dynamics with the rumble, modulating from loud to soft and back. The leader can conduct the rumble as a wave through the group, with players getting louder when the wave reaches them. And at the end, the leader can create a dramatic stop cut.

The layer out. The leader can indicate players to stop, one person at a time, until there is only one player left, and when that player stops there is silence. The leader can layer out each player in order of their seat location, or the leader can act like the producer in the mixing session, fading down specific players to make changes in the overall sound. The leader can indicate sections or instrument groups to layer out (e.g. – all the flutes, all the strings).

The fade out. The leader can step into a highly visible location and conduct the group volume up and down, ending with a fade to silence. The fade can take place as a group, or it can be a fade wave (which will look similar to layering out, one person at a time).

Withholding a call during call and response. With the group in the midst of a rhythm, the leader can indicate that the group will answer or echo rhythmic calls. The leader gives a series of calls, and at the end, simply does not give another call in the space where one is expected. The group is silent.

Armed with these ways of stopping a group, teachers may feel more comfortable getting the groups started in improvisational activities without fear of too much chaos.

Other Useful Drum Circle Concepts

In working with rhythm groups, it is often useful to subdivide the group to hear a variety of sonic options. This is called sculpting. One way to sculpt is to make slicing motions, indicating where a physical division will start and stop. Bring your hands across the space to indicate where the highlighted group begins and ends. Tell that group to keep playing by rolling your hands in front of you. The players who are not in the highlighted group constitute the rest of the circle (ROC). This is a very important concept. The players you are not working (for the moment) need to be given instructions for what to do while you are working with a highlighted group. In the example above, sculpt a subgroup and tell them to keep playing. Then turn to the rest of the circle and do a stop cut, followed by call and response. Lastly, conduct the whole circle to resume playing together, or to end together. Sculpting lets the leader be an improviser using the group as the instrument.

Sometimes the leader may wish to model improvisation by showing how a complex, multi-layer piece is built from layered parts. The leader can start by teaching a looped rhythm to the whole group. Next, the leader can improvise to create a second complimentary part, or have a part predetermined. The group can be sculpted in half, with one half continuing the original rhythm, while a second part is taught to the other half of the group. This two-part piece becomes the platform. The leader can invite improvised solos from volunteers or continue to create more parts. The leader can subdivide the group further by sculpting, pass out additional loops, and thereby create a more complex piece.

While it can be fun to help fulfill someone else's creative vision by repeating parts that were passed out by a leader, it can become boring after a while. The leader can encourage each person's creative exploration by inviting everyone to "make it your own," and introduce variations. In an ideal learning environment, the majority of the playing time will be done with this kind of license and freedom.

What to Listen for When Improvising in Rhythm - holes and overlaps

Every rhythm has filled spaces and holes. When your group is repeating a rhythm, ask them to try listening for the holes in the timing. You can also create a hole in a rhythmic pattern, so it becomes a place to encourage brief improvised soloing. For example, the group can play a pattern for three measures then silently mark time for one measure.

Start by teaching your group a basic rhythm for drumming on percussion instruments or on body percussion. Have the group repeat the rhythm as a loop. Play for three measures, then stop cut the group while marking the pulse in the air. Bring the group back to the rhythm

precisely on the beat after the one measure rest. Identify the empty measure as space - a hole to fill. Request volunteers to fill the hole with a solo the next time it comes around. Permit as many solos as you have volunteers. Be cautious about requiring anyone to solo; it is a high-pressure moment for some sensitive people. Soften the pressure by permitting a person's solo to be the same as the ongoing pattern the whole group was playing. Of course, you can also encourage explorations of all kinds.

Play Your Instrument Like a Drum

To highlight rhythmic awareness, take a segment of a musical piece that you are working on as an ensemble. Play 8-16 measures of the piece. Have one section of your group "lay out" and just listen. Then repeat that 8-16 measure segment with the whole ensemble, and have the preselected section just play percussive sounds on their instruments. They will be marking the attacks of the notes, but not the pitches. Start again using just the percussive sounds. Invite the remaining sections to join in, also using only percussive sounds in place of the written notes. For the percussion instruments, have them play their stands and hardware, to be sure they are playing the rhythms in a new way.

Band and Orchestra Improvisation- Chromatic Practice and Sirening

In addition to improvising freely, without constraints, you can also focus on structured improvisations that develop instrumental skills in a playful setting.

Start with concert A, or with the note you use to tune the brass section. Divide the group in half. One section holds the tuning note as a drone. The other half is free to explore, but they have to explore chromatically, all in adjacent half steps. They can go fast or slow, and play in any rhythm, but the "game" is to keep the notes "all in a row." Switch which group is holding the drone note and which is exploring.

For strings and for instruments capable of continuously bending notes, you can use sirening. In place of chromatic playing, a siren uses all of the space between one diatonic note and the next. To start, half the group holds a drone note and the other half explores using sirening. They can go fast or slow, and play in any rhythm, but the "game" is to play only "smooth lines" of continuously bending tones. Switch which group is holding the drone note and which is exploring using sirening.

Pizzicato and Strumming for Orchestra

One admirable thing about rock and jazz musicians is that they know how to jam with each other. That is, they often improvise melody lines over chord changes and trade solos, with each player getting a turn. They also make up new chord patterns and enjoy the novelty. To

bring this spirit to your orchestra, you can teach your string players to explore their instruments like rock star guitarists.

As a first step, have all orchestra players put their bows down. Each of the string sections can play a two-finger chord that includes their open strings. For the violins, they can finger an A on the low G string and an E on the D string. The result is fifths – AEAE. Since this is neither major nor minor, it supports improvisation in nearly any scale. This is what rock players call “power chords.” For the violas and cellos, the analogous fingering includes a D on the low C string and an A on the adjacent G string, resulting in DADA.

Designate a section to be the “strummers.” For example, let’s start with the violas. Using an up and down motion of the thumb, the players strum a repeating rhythm: Down, down, down, down-up (or any rhythm that can be easily modeled). The violas strum in unison. The other sections “noodle” over the strumming, using only pizzicato sounds. Give each section a chance to strum and give each section a chance to improvise. We suggest pizzicato because it is more forgiving of slight glitches in intonation, and the object of the activity is to encourage exploration with as little anxiety as possible. Loud bowed sounds might result in less exploring and more avoidance of possible errors or clinkers.

Coyote Games

The “coyote” is the trickster. The coyote tries to get players to lose their rhythm home base or to drift from being in tune to being lost.

In band, orchestra, or chorus, pick a section to hold a drone note. Designate one player in advance as the “coyote.” That player tries to influence the rest of the section to play out of unison or out of time. The section’s job is to stick together and resist that influence. The group will learn to fine tune their listening to focus on their own section and filter out competing sounds. The coyote will learn how to identify who among the group is most prone to being influenced, and will also learn whether playing something extremely different from the group or something nearly identical will give the coyote more power to influence others.

Ensembles with shifting members 54321 - the finger game

In this game, the idea is for the group to self-adjust so that the number of active players matches the number of fingers that the facilitator holds up. Let’s say your whole ensemble is engaged in a group rhythm jam, or they are each sustaining a long tone in a giant tone cluster. If your group has 25 people, for example, the leader might hold up 3 fingers. All but three players are supposed to drop out, and the leader does not indicate which three are to keep playing. The group has to pay close enough attention to its members to accomplish this task. This is not the most musical way of paring down, of course, since the

emphasis at first is more visual (who is still playing) than auditory (what the three remaining people are playing). But it does introduce the dynamic of changing the number of active players to make artful contrasts in the overall sound. As the game continues, the leader can hold up various numbers of fingers - any number from 10 to zero. One finger requires a single player to play alone. Zero means everyone is silent. Seven requires the group to look at each other and adjust until only seven players are active - a kind of musical chairs. And a skillful leader will make sure that the game includes many segments in which everyone is playing. It would be worthwhile to notice how much the whole group's playing changes after they have experienced the smaller group's sounds. Some groups gravitate towards improvisations in which everyone plays all the time. This activity gives them ways to break that habit.

Improvisation in General Music Classes

There are several entry points that classroom music teachers can use to add improvisation to their repertoire of activities. We understand that the topic can be intimidating, but there are simple and enjoyable ways to get started. The general principles are to simplify participation so that students at various levels of motor coordination can be included, and to allow many forms of contrast in sound as a path to personal expression.

Early Childhood

At early childhood level, there are many familiar songs that are part of music class life. Improvisation can be added to any song if the teacher takes advantage of the familiar rhythm patterns in the song. These patterns can be extracted and repeated, much like the way hip hop artists sample and loop parts of familiar songs. If we apply this idea to "Old MacDonald," we can take the phrase "had a farm" and repeat it as a loop of three regular beats and a rest. Over this platform of rhythm, a teacher could solicit other original and spontaneous rhythm pattern ideas and divide the group so that both patterns can be heard together. The children might make up patterns of animal sounds or use the other syllable sounds in the song. This activity can be done with any age-appropriate song.

Using rhythm band instruments, students can play how they feel and the other students can guess the feeling. No background rhythm or coordination is needed. The group plays the emotion back to the student, who gets to experience the feedback and validation. This is one of the simplest ways to tell a sound story.

Expanding on Call and Response

Teachers at later elementary levels often use a clapping rhythm call and response to gather student attention. The most common one might be: "1,2,3, eyes on me!" The rhythm is

echoed back to the teacher, who then can begin to impart information. The clap and call is a cue that important information is coming up next. The power of call and response as a teaching tool is likely under-utilized. In addition to soliciting an exact echo of a familiar and unchanging call, teachers can introduce variations in the call. This will keep the students on their toes and make any “automatic pilot” responses less likely. Teachers can also introduce improvisational elements to call and response by distinguishing among several possible replies. *Call and echo* requires an exact copy. But *call and answer* permits a related non-identical response, much as the answer to “how are you?” is not an echo of the question, but “I am fine.” *Call and imitate* allows for the response to be the best possible imitation, which nonetheless may vary from person to person. This works when the calls get more and more intricate or difficult, and the teacher wants to maintain an encouraging atmosphere. It presents a good challenge for the students to stay in the game and respond as best they can. *Call and contrast* specifically requires the response to be something different from the call, whether the contrast is to be low instead of high, or soft instead of loud, or slow instead of fast.

Early elementary students are generally in need of more opportunities to move about while learning. Teachers can incorporate improvisation into the movements by linking rhythmic responses with stepping in place. Some structured music games and songs provide one iteration of a “home” rhythm, followed by an equal silent period of marking time. This creates a “hole” of silence that students can fill with their own made-up pattern that fits the rhythm of the song. Teachers can adapt nearly any grade level appropriate song to this format. Students may step in place to the beat. One at a time, they can make up a body rhythm pattern or a vocal pattern to fill the hole while the rest of class maintains the beat.

Older Elementary Students

Another improvisation-friendly activity is to encourage musical conversations. With the class arranged in a circle, start a common rhythm using body percussion. Each student in turn gets to “tell a short story,” using only melodic syllables, but no actual words. The next student gets to react and respond in melodic syllables or tell their own short story in sound.

Extensions of Activities that Use Orff Instruments

Many American school music teachers are familiar with the main activities and specific instruments associated with Orff Schulwerk. The instruments are very adaptable to a variety of musical styles and levels of sophistication. Orff was a strong advocate for the integration of language, movement, and music:

“Elemental Music is never just music. It’s bound up with movement, dance and speech, and so it is a form of music in which one must participate, in which one is involved not as a listener but as a co-performer.”

And Orff also believed that the path to learning involved engagement via playfulness:

“Since the beginning of time, children have not liked to study. They would much rather play, and if you have their interests at heart, you will let them learn while they play; they will find that what they have mastered is child’s play.”

In his own words, the Orff approach is fundamentally similar to what we advocate; beginning with percussion and trusting the process of group improvisation to develop musicianship using social connections and personal emotional experiences:

“I encouraged the activation of the students by the playing of their own music, that is, through improvisation and composing it themselves. I therefore did not want to train them on highly developed art instruments, but rather on instruments that were preferably rhythmic, comparatively easy to learn, primitive and unsophisticated. My idea was to take my students so far that they could improvise their own music (however unassuming) and their own accompaniments to movement. The art of creating music for this ensemble came directly from playing the instruments themselves. It was therefore important to acquire a well-developed technique of improvisation, and the exercises for developing this technique should above all lead the students to a spontaneous, personal, musical expression.”

On the academic side, modern Orff activities are tremendously valuable in helping to develop accuracy in musical listening and in developing beginning literacy in rhythm notation. But originality can be sacrificed in the process if the emphasis tends to be on the repetition of patterns that originate from the teacher, with little opportunity to create patterns or discover patterns through interactions with peers. Many Orff activities employ rhythmic building blocks that students are permitted to re-assemble in various orders as an “improvisation.” But this is a far cry from the spontaneous expression of musical impulses that would begin as body movement, get transferred to the voice, and in the end be played on an instrument, or the music that results from social play, imitation and conversation.

Teachers who use the Orff instruments with sound bars have the opportunity to use these in ways that encourage more original music and social improvisation experiences. The simplest version would involve teaching the “homer and roamer” roles that are common in drum circle facilitation as written about by Arthur Hull. Most of the class can be assigned a regular repeating rhythm. This is “home,” and anyone who stays home or returns home is thereby a “homer.” One at a time, students can be encouraged to explore away from home by making up their own rhythms that go with the “home” pattern. By going away from home on a rhythm journey, the student becomes a “roamer,” until they resume playing the home pattern. Then other students can have a turn exploring.

Once the “homer” and “roamer” roles are established, this activity can be presented in smaller settings. Pairs of students can alternate who is homer and who is roaming, using both the sound and physical cues like eye contact to signal when the roles are exchanged.

This activity is very similar to the “solo-ostinato” game of Music for People. The one difference is whether the repeating pattern that the students return to is the same every time, or whether the “homer” role can involve any regularly repeating pattern, familiar or novel.

In general, rhythm activities can be expanded into improvisational activities with judicious permission for students to create variations in the patterns they are taught. The idea is to find ways to include the creative ideas that will be inspired in students when they hear and play rhythms. Rather than inhibit all responses other than a unison rhythm, students can be given a set period of time to “make it their own,” and experience improvisational exploring before returning to the common beat. This can be done one student at a time as a solo opportunity, or it can be set up so that half the group are “homers” while the other half are “roamers,” all at once. This permits more anonymous exploring, which may generate more freedom and social interaction within the music.

Modifications to Orff Techniques that Create World Music Scales

The tone bars of the Orff instruments can be selected to encourage improvisation in the scales and modes common to specific cultures. While the default arrangement is to have diatonic bars covering an octave from C to C, by removing bars one can literally travel the world. A scale that will evoke images of Japanese culture comes from removing the G and D bars to generate an efabce arrangement. The group can be divided so that part of the group plays a preset pattern and other group members “roam” in the spirit of the scale. This gives students a way to experience their own embodiment of the moods the scale evokes.

Similarly, by removing the D and A bars, a Balinese scale results – efgbce. The trip to Bali might include a combination of Orff instruments and other percussion. Removing the F and B bars yields an African pentatonic scale – cdega, which can generate many sonorous overlaid patterns. A version that evokes India would include the bars for d, f sharp, g, a, b flat, c and d. When “roaming” to India, it is easy to include a drone note along with the rhythms. Part of the group can provide a drum roll on the low D or D and A to mimic the drone instruments of that culture, while the rest of the group plays in patterns using the scale, and soloists get to improvise and explore.

For teachers without access to Orff instruments, but who have keyboards or pianos, you can arrange duets on the piano using the pentatonic scale provided by the black keys. One student can provide a repeating pattern while the other explores. This scale minimizes the likelihood of any “clinkers” that could inhibit experimentation. As described above, the roles of “homer and roamer” can alternate based on a set number of beats, or based on the spontaneous communication that a roamer has returned home. As soon as a player establishes a new repeated pattern, their sound, their eye contact and their body language can all say, “I’m done exploring, it’s your turn now.”

Vocal Syllables for Rhythm

On the subject of world music and cultural rhythm explorations, Mary Knysh has developed lessons in world music in which the verbal content mirrors and supports the ways signature rhythms are played. For example, for Caribbean music, the students can say and play: its ca LYP so, its ca LYP so. Once the group has learned this rhythm, a second rhythm can be introduced as a new layer: this one is - CLA ve, this one is - CLA ve, etc. These rhythms can be learned as is, or they can be staggered with multiple entrances. The rhythms can be used as the grounding platform for improvised solos and explorations by sections of the group or by soloists. The “roaming” explorations can be done using body percussion, rhythm band instruments, hand drums, or vocalese syllables.

Some cultures teach drumming through the use of vocal syllables. This is the case in India with solkattu syllables, and in the Nigerian tradition of drum master Baba Olatunji. He popularized a system for teaching African drumming using the syllable Gun for the deep center tones of the hand drums (such as a djembe or ashiko), the syllables Go-Do for the midrange tones, and the syllables Pa-Ta for the slap edge tones. The learning system involves the whole body and breath whenever you sing what you play. The creative spirit is likewise engaged when the music comes from inside and you play what you sing.

Inclusive Improvising with Folk Instruments – Ukulele and Recorder

In general music classes, it is common to teach folk instruments to give students the experience of playing simple music in ensemble format. Flutophone, recorder and ukulele are perhaps the most common such instruments. These instruments, by virtue of their simplicity and ease of sound making, are also ideal for introducing some of the basic activities of solo and social improvisation.

Let’s start with the notion that we want all of our students to be able to participate in instrumental activities, even those with perceptual, attentional and motor limitations. More improvising can be done with ukulele and recorder when you permit the instruments to be used in both traditional and non-traditional ways. For example, many students lack the finger dexterity and control to make ukulele chords and shift positions on time. The adaptations that permit greater participation include starting out all students playing the ukulele string side down, using it as a drum. Some students may need to keep playing this way, if the dexterity to press down strings is outside their skill level. But when all students start out using the instrument as percussion, that role is not associated with a limitation. Along the same lines, the first uses of the ukulele in normal playing position can involve developing the strumming hand before the chording hand. In this teaching sequence, everyone holds the ukulele and mutes the strings with a light pinching grip. The instrument can mimic a scratcher or guiro when strummed. Or the strumming sound can be described as a “chunk” when the fingers strum an up-down pattern. The “chunk” sound will change as the strings are pinched with a lighter or tighter grip. Everyone in the class can be taught

to play this way, before any tonal, melodic or harmonic aspects are introduced. Any students who cannot finger chords can have a rhythm role that will be valuable in the ensemble.

The next level of adaptation to ukulele involves tuning. In Hawaii, it is common for guitars and ukuleles to be tuned to open chords (“slack key” tunings). This means that to create a pleasant sound, the players do not have to finger the neck at all. One slack key tuning for ukulele is gecg. The two outside strings are in unison and can be used as a drone, and the two inside strings can be fingered to make simple chords. The instrument can be conceptualized the same as a dulcimer, with drone strings and melody strings.

In slack key tuning, the inside strings of the ukulele can be fingered in patterns that can move up and down the neck without shifting their orientation. The first shape involves placing one finger on the first fret of the second string (counting up from the ground), and another finger on the second fret of the third string. By shifting this finger pattern up and down the neck, the player can create simple melodies over a drone supplied by the two outer strings. The teacher can use the idea of “homer and roamer” to have most of the class play the four open strings in a common rhythm, and allow soloists to roam up and down the neck, using the finger pattern on the two inside strings. To add variety, a second finger pattern involves placing two fingers next to each other on the fifth fret of the second and third strings. Similarly, this pattern can be used to explore up and down the neck. The chording styles that are used on blues guitar can be found on ukulele in this tuning. Lay a flat round object like a pen or a dowel across the strings. Slide the dowel up and down the neck, parallel with the fret markers, to play chords. It can also be used to finger a melody on individual strings.

One general principle of improvisation that Music for People teaches is to “be a master of what you can control.” Simplifying the structure of common instruments puts that goal in reach of more students more quickly. The satisfaction of being able to make pleasant and socially acceptable sounds keeps students engaged in music making; the frustration of not being able to do so often drives students away from music.

When we apply this type of adaptive mindset to the recorder or flutophone, the corresponding adaptation is to set up the instruments with the thumb hole and the top three holes taped closed. This will make the default note a G. A G will sound when the instrument gets wind blown into it, with no fingering necessary. All students can begin this way, playing one note in various rhythms. For those students with the dexterity to learn fingerings with thumb and fingers, the next step is to uncover the third hole. With no fingers, the instrument will play an A, and with the third hole covered, it will play a G. As students develop the reliable ability to switch fingerings, more holes can be uncovered, bringing more notes into play. The improvisation activity that goes along with this approach is the “one note solo.” The group plays a common rhythm on the G note that all of the recorders are preset to play. The teacher provides any song in that key. The students are using the recorders to reinforce the rhythm of the song. One student at a time gets a four beat “break”

where they can play any rhythm they wish, using the one note their instrument can make. As you add notes to their sound pallet by removing the tape from the holes, the patterns they can play will become more complex. But even with just two notes, a student can create a solo that capitalizes on the contrast between a G and an A.

Concluding Thoughts

The games described above will introduce improvisation into the fabric of your classes. There are further worlds to explore in the area of improvised music, including improvised ensembles that interact and self-regulate. This has been the stock in trade of the organization *Music for People* for over 30 years. Their version of Social Improvisation accepts players at all levels of experience, and provides them with playing opportunities in which every player can succeed at improvising, learning to be “a master of what they can control.”

For information on how to create improvised pieces that can be featured in performance settings, contact the authors. For over a decade, James Oshinsky’s college improvisation class has ended with a concert that was entirely self-directed and spontaneously improvised by the students. For two decades, Mary Knysh has led summer workshops with a culminating improvised concert, curated on the fly. They both owe their education in this area to the pioneering teaching of the late cellist, David Darling and the organization he founded, *Music for People*.

The activities above, and ways to present them in music classes, performing ensembles, and workshops, are described in detail in books and articles available from the authors.

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Additional Resources:

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Websites:

www.ArtsEdSEL.org

www.musicforpeople.org

www.musicconstructed.com

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James Oshinsky is a psychologist, educator and musician. Is the author of *Return to Child*, a book detailing the humanistic approach to music improvisation pioneered by the late cellist David Darling, and the *Music Doctor Improv Deck*, a set of flash cards deigned to teach the roles musicians can play in improvising ensembles. He has contributed lesson plans addressing improvisation and social emotional learning on the internet at the musicconstructed.com website. He can be reached at www.tinyurl.com/musicdr.

Mary Knysh is an international workshop leader and speaker on music education, improvisation, and wellness. She promotes the value of improvisation as a pathway to neuroplasticity in populations from pre-schoolers to elders. She is the author of *Innovative Drum Circles* and *1,2, Let's All Play*, books designed to provide teachers with rhythm, harmony and melody-based improvisation lesson plans. She can be reached at www.music4wellness.com.