

Improvisation

We are all born improvisers. In childhood, we move from linguistic babble to words to statements to questions; we think and improvise in the language before we ever learn to read and write with understanding. Language conversation becomes the readiness for learning to read linguistic language, conversely musical improvisation becomes the readiness for learning to read music notation. It is “analogous to conversation in language.”¹ Musical improvisation is conversation that follows the parameters, is comprehended, can be recalled, and is spontaneous. It is not just a series of random notes.

Improvisation differentiates musicians who create from the those who only reproduce. The latter are limited musically as they are dependent on a repertoire. Creators, on the other hand, not only reproduce ready-made songs, they can change and enhance them, and create new melodies or harmonies automatically and comprehend what was created.

Only the readiness to learn to improvise can be taught. The ‘readiness’ includes (a) building a repertoire of tunes in a variety of tonalities, meters, harmonic progression and styles and (b) building an aural-oral vocabulary of tonal, rhythm, melodic and harmonic patterns. Hence it is imperative that rote songs and the three-step process (neutral-neutral, syllable-syllable, neutral-syllable) of echoing patterns be incorporated in the music literacy curriculum. Rhythm syllables organize musical thoughts and increase comprehension. The syllables also serve as a tool in connecting the ear to notation.²

Additional information on (a) building a repertoire of rote tunes, (b) benefits of improvisation, (c) guidelines for improvising, and (d) the parameters and process for a number of improvisation activities can be found in Appendix D.

PART I: CHAPTER 2

Simple Meter—Quarter Note = Beat Unit; Divided Beat

Improvisation Activities

See Appendix D for additional details

Call and Response

- **Process:**
 - Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. The instructor or Student A musically chants a rhythm pattern on a neutral syllable or rhythm syllables from Part I, Chapter 2.3. Student B (a) repeats the pattern as closely as possible, (b) makes only one change in the pattern, or (c) repeats the pattern in retrograde (reverse); Students C and D engage in the same process.

Rhythm Patterns with One Change

A B C D E

Rhythm Patterns in Retrograde

A B C D

This activity also works musical memory!

¹ Christopher D. Azzara and Richard F. Grunow, *Developing Musicianship Through Improvisation* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007), iv.

² Azzara and Grunow, vii.

Improvisation develops skills for working collaboratively with others.

Call and Response, cont.

- Variation I: The instructor/team member sings/chants a call from Part I, Chapter 2.3; the entire class reproduces the same pattern as closely as possible (including accents, articulation and/or dynamics.) or repeats the pattern in retrograde (reverse). The instructor or a different student chants a new call and the class reproduces the same pattern or the pattern in retrograde.
- Variation II: One team improvises on a neutral syllable using the basic process while the other team(s) writes (dictates) the patterns.
- Variation III: Instructor or team leader indicates the beat function element [elongated beat, beat, divided beat, subdivided beat, borrowed beat, etc.] to audiate. The instructor/Student A chants a pattern from Part I, Chapter 2.3 on rhythm syllables or a neutral syllable. The next student echoes the patterns chanting on rhythm syllables or a neutral syllable audiating (silent singing) the prescribed beat function element.

Audiate Beat Function Element

CALL RESPONSE

A. Audiate beat function rhythms in the pattern.

CALL RESPONSE

B. Audiate beat division function rhythms in the pattern.

CALL RESPONSE

C. Audiate downbeat, beat division function rhythms in the pattern.

CALL RESPONSE

D. Audiate upbeat, beat division function rhythms in the pattern.

- Variation IV. Individually practice *Call and Response* alternating the three options listed in the basic process, using the MP3 rhythm files found in Part I, Chapter 2, located on the Oxford Learning Link.
- **Parameters:** Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 2.3 (Divided Beat, Beat, Elongated Beat, Sustained Beat). The instructor or team leader designates length of patterns (1-2 measures), the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, and/or down-up motion with hands) and then sets the tempo. Rhythm patterns to be selected from Section 2.3.
 - Remember to perform the patterns (a) with inflective expression (foundation of phrasing) and (b) while moving to meter, macro beat, or micro beat (facilitates understanding of rhythm).

The goal is to develop spontaneous, rapid, automatic reaction to what is heard.

Add A Rhythm

- **Process:**
 - Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. Using rhythm syllables, Student A chants a known two beat rhythm pattern from Part I, Chapter 2.3. Student B echoes the pattern and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; Student C echoes the patterns chanted by Student A and B and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; Student D echoes the patterns chanted by Student A, B and C and adds a different two beat rhythm pattern; etc.

Add A Two Beat Rhythm

Add A Two Beat Rhythm, cont.

E



F



- Variation I: One team improvises on a neutral syllable using the process listed above while the other team(s) writes the patterns (dictates) the patterns.
- Variation II: Integrate accents, articulations and/or dynamic into the rhythm patterns.
- **Parameters:**
 - Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 2.3. The instructor designates the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, circular hand/arm motion, and/or down-up motion) and then sets the tempo.
 - Remember to perform the patterns (a) with inflective expression (foundation of phrasing) and (b) while moving to meter, macro beat, or micro beat (facilitates understanding of rhythm).

This activity also works musical memory!

Same or Different

- **Process:**
 - Basic: Divide class into teams of 5-8. The instructor or Student A chants a known rhythm pattern (neutral syllable or rhythm syllables); Student B echoes the pattern exactly or improvises a similar but different pattern that uses the elements from Part I, Chapter 2. The class or individuals indicate whether the patterns were the same or different.

Same or Different Rhythm Patterns

A



B



Different

C



D



Same

E



F



Same

G



H



Different

- Variation I: One team improvises on a neutral syllable while the other team(s) writes (dictates) each pattern.
- Variation II: Student A chants a known rhythm pattern; Student B echoes the pattern exactly or improvises a similar pattern on his/her instruments.
- Variation III: Individually practice *Same or Different* using the MP3 rhythm files found in Part I, Chapter 1, located on the Oxford Learning Link.
- **Parameters:**
 - Rhythm patterns to be selected from Part I, Chapter 2.3 (Divided Beat, Beat, Elongated Beat, Sustained Beat). The instructor designates the meter (simple-duple, triple or quadruple), physical motion (metric motion, heel march, and/or down-up motion with hands) and then sets the tempo.
 - Remember to perform the patterns (a) with inflective expression (foundation of phrasing) and (b) while moving to meter, macro beat, or micro beat (facilitates understanding of rhythm).

Remember that one of the primary goals is to create interesting and musical rhythms.