

First Steps In Jazz Improvisation

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The ideas in this presentation are a culmination of my having learned from exemplary music educators and the resources they have introduced to me. This presentation is directly influenced by Mr. Brent Campbell - Vincent Massey High School, Brandon, MB, Mr. Greg Gatten - Brandon University, MB, Dr. John Kratus - Michigan State University, MI, and Mr. Bill Kristjansson - Vincent Massey Collegiate, Winnipeg, MB.

A Safe Environment for Learning to Improvise

- Make improvisation part of daily music making.
- Communicate that making “mistakes” is an essential part of the learning process.
- Establish an environment where students are offered multiple formats for participation in improvisation (i.e., partners, solo, group, private practice).
- Model creative risk taking.

Strengthening the Connection between the Ear and the Instrument

- Sing!
- Call and echo activities can build “vocabulary” in the jazz idiom. These can be teacher or student created, and can also stem from repertoire and jazz recordings.
- Invite students to embellish familiar melodies using a variety of musical elements (i.e., pitches, dynamics, range, rhythms, use of space, etc.).

For example #1: Vamp for Improvisation

Invite the drummer to establish a style and tempo. Sing a starting pitch and have students sing, then find the pitch on their instruments. Repeat this process to teach a collection of pitches by ear. Invite the bass player to improvise an ostinato on the starting pitch, then invite the pianist or guitarist to “comp” some of the pitches on a rhythm of their choice. This sequence establishes a musical context for call and echo or call and response activities, as well as improvising “around the room”, or as sections, individuals, and pairs. Vary this activity using a variety of tonal centers, larger collections of pitches, and styles.

** This example is based on an activity called “Space Jam” developed by Fred Sturm (the designer of the “Ears Before Books” method).*

Sample Rhythm Section for Vamp

The musical notation for the Sample Rhythm Section for Vamp consists of three staves: Piano, Bass, and Drum Set. The Piano staff is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, showing a vamp of G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and G4 (quarter). The Bass staff is in G major and 4/4 time, showing a vamp of G2 (half). The Drum Set staff is in 4/4 time, showing a pattern of HH (closed) (quarter), BD (quarter), and a sequence of eighth notes: 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. A double bar line with repeat dots is at the end of the Drum Set staff.

Sample Vamps Using Common Jazz Chord Progressions

1 I I V7 V7

Pno. *Ebmaj7* *Bb7*

Bass *Ebmaj7* *Bb7*

Dr. *Ride Cymbal* *BD* *HH*

2 *ii min7* *V7* *I* *ii min7* *V7* *I* *I*

Pno. *ii min7* *V7* *I* *ii min7* *V7* *I* *I*

Bass *Gmin7* *C7* *Fmaj7* *Fmaj7*

Dr. *Ride Cymbal* *BD* *HH*

3 *I* *vi min7* *ii min7* *V7*

Pno. *I* *vi min7* *ii min7* *V7*

Bass *Cmaj7* *Amin7* *Dmin7* *G7*

Dr. *Ride Cymbal* *BD* *HH*

Listening Up: Using Recordings to Enhance Student Learning in Jazz

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Getting Started: Cultivate an environment in which students feel validated and safe to share their observations with others.

Sample listening activities can be accessed using the following link: <https://goo.gl/GhTr2C>

Begin with broad horizons:

What do you notice about this recording? What are some musical strengths that this artist/ensemble possesses? What other artists or compositions does this recording remind you of?

Simple activities to focus listening:

Show me how you hear the beat by tapping your heel; Show me beat one of each bar by clapping; Raise your hand when you hear the harmonic "home base" change (modal examples); Clap at the beginning of each chorus; Hum the root of the chord; Speak quarter notes on "doo"; Speak the rhythm of the "comping" instrument; Clap the clave pattern; Count how many bars are in the form; How many choruses was the _____ solo?

Questions to emphasize specific concepts:

Improvisation: How does the improvisation relate to the melody of the tune? In what ways does the artist use contrast in this solo? In what ways are the first and second phrases of the solo related? How do the performers build intensity during the solo?

Form: Which two bars in the form are different from those found in a standard 12-bar blues progression (i.e., Freddie Freeloader)? In what ways does the "B" section contrast the "A" section? How (if at all) does the rhythm section acknowledge the "top" of the form?

Interaction: What takes place in the spaces between the phrases? What does the rhythm section do differently during the second solo? What idea might the artist(s) be communicating to the listeners in this example?

Questions to extend responses:

Can you tell me more about this? Who can add something to this idea? Who can identify an example of this technique in the recording? Who heard something different from this idea? Why do you think the artist made that choice? What impact did that technique have on the performance? Have you ever tried a similar technique in your own performing?

Approaching the "Swing" Style

"Swing in its broadest sense involves the simultaneous interaction of rhythmic components of articulation, duration, note placement, contour, dynamics, and vibrato" (p. 12, Kernfeld).

"Swing is a combination of two things: rhythmic interpretation and rhythmic unity" (p. 45, Coker).

Listen to swing examples in a variety of tempos and orchestrations so that students understand the range of the style. For Example: Count Basie Band performing *Jumpin' at the Woodside* and *Front Burner*; Cannonball Adderley Quintet performing *The Sleeper* and *Limehouse Blues*.

Draw students' attention to the drummer, especially the ride cymbal, the "walking" bass, and the "comping" figures from piano/guitar. Have students "speak" quarters and eighths along with recordings. Have students play rhythmic ideas along with recordings. Encourage students to emulate the stylistic elements demonstrated by their recorded role models.