

Exploration, Experimentation and Opportunity: Facilitating Improvisation in Music Classes

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Abstract: In this article, the author discusses the topic of creativity and improvisation. Using his sister as a research subject, the author takes the reader through the process of how to introduce and facilitate a safe place for improvisation and the learning synapses that follow. He points out that improvisation is something that can happen in any style given the right environment.

Improvisation is the spontaneous creation of music and the inherent way that people make music. Unfortunately, the classical canon has destroyed many people's inherent creativity and to a large degree has succeeded in making music a non-creative art form. Bloom's taxonomy suggests that the highest level of thinking and learning is creating (Giddings, 2013, p. 45). Many classically trained musicians will argue that playing music on a written page *is* creating music, when in essence, they are only *re-creating*. When learning to write, do we re-create pieces of writing to show that we know how to write? When painting, do we re-create pieces of art to demonstrate our knowledge of art? Perhaps, but does that really demonstrate a person's knowledge of a subject? Art and writing classes never stop at re-creating; they naturally progress through Bloom's Taxonomy to creating without really thinking about it. In these art and writing classrooms, creating is natural and expected. This is not the case, however, with music teaching and learning. As Dobbins (1980) puts it "the capacities for creative self-expression and spontaneous conversational interaction indicate a person's proficiency in the use of a verbal language. The most exactly equivalent music skill is that of improvisation" (p.36).

My sister played the flute in school for 6 years. When she was in her undergraduate program at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) taking chemistry, she played in the Welshman Community Band at Holland College in Charlottetown for about one year. After UPEI, she went to optometry school to get her Doctor of Optometry degree at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. She hadn't played flute since before she began her graduate work about 4 or 5 years ago. She, being trained as a musician in junior high and high school was a product of the classical canon. She had never improvised or created her own music. As part of my master's degree I decided I would see if I could help my sister to improvise using many of the skills I had learned over my 7 year teaching career and combine them with



the ideas from Jeffrey Agrell, Professor of Horn at University of Iowa and author of *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* (2008). When I called my sister about being a student of mine she was understandably nervous. When I told her that I was going to teach her to improvise she was even more nervous. She kept saying, "you know I don't know anything right?" We met at 4 different times for about a half an hour each and each lesson was recorded.

Lesson 1

Lesson 1 began with a bit of a review on playing the flute as she hadn't played in over 4 years. It went pretty well and she was able to remember a Bb scale. Then, we moved onto a brief discussion about improvisation. I asked her "what comes to your mind when you think of the word 'improvising?'" Her response was "making up your own music" and "not going by the music on the sheet." "Does it scare you?" I asked. "Yes" she responded quickly. She had never done it before. From there we moved on to long tones with flute and trombone. The idea was to play long tones together but not in any specific order. It forced her to listen and acted as a warm up to what she was going to be playing. She seemed a bit apprehensive at first but we did eventually get into the 'swing' of things. Once I thought she felt a little more comfortable, we turned it into a bit of a game. The aim was to find tones in the Bb major scale that sounded nice together. We were going to hold the harmonies that sounded nice and move on from the ones that didn't sound as nice. She was pretty much staying within the octave. We tried it again but this time I asked her to extend the octave to give herself more choices. I informed her that she was improvising and she just said that she "was just changing [her] fingers." I responded to her by saying "you are making those choices though." We moved onto using more notes outside of the one octave and did that for a while. She was definitely being more creative at this point and some really nice, 'logical' harmonies came through. Much of it could have been a fluke but she could have also been listening more closely. The next part of the lesson moved onto simple melodies. I limited her to three notes: Bb, C, D. This was a call and response game. The aim was to experiment with creating simple, four beat melodies with only three notes. She took a few tries to get the idea and we later moved onto finishing each

other's melodies. I would play a 4 beat melody that she would subsequently finish. After only a couple of tries, I noticed that she was using notes other than Bb, C or D. At this point I said "I noticed you are using Eb and F in your melodies, let's try to incorporate these into our melodies now." She was finding it somewhat frustrating to play only 3 notes. As she was playing her part of the melodies she was stopping to fix 'mistakes.' I told her that "there are no such things as mistakes in improvisation because nobody knows what you are going to be doing except you." Once she was able to 'let go' a little bit, her melodies were beginning to sound pretty good. She was still a little apprehensive toward her playing but this is understandable considering she had never improvised before and she hadn't played in a number of years. At this time I was going to move onto a 'pass the melody' game where we were going to learn the same melody and then change something about it every time we play it. Instead, I thought it might be more important for her to just 'jam it out' for a few minutes to help her become more comfortable. So instead of the 'pass the melody' game, I got my guitar and played a simple I-V- vi -IV chord progression in the key of Bb. She played and still seemed a bit nervous about it. She was thinking about the 'mistakes' which were making her more apprehensive. As we got going and I told her to not worry about the 'mistakes,' she was better able to play without as many inhibitions. There was one point where she worried a lot about an 'A' that she was playing because she didn't really like the sound of it. For the most part, though, she did say that she was happier as we went along. After this activity I asked her a few more questions. "What do you think now?" I asked her. She said that it "wasn't too bad" and that she was having trouble remembering fingerings. She also mentioned that playing without the notes was very difficult. After this I asked her what other scales she knew. She said, "the one with Ab instead of A in it." Of course, by this she likely meant Eb major. Instead, as a challenge, I decided to go with Ab major. After she practiced the scale a few times we played a 2 part chorale for flute and trombone. Almost right away she said "don't show me up," indicating that she was still somewhat nervous and letting her 'ego' get in the way of her improvising. So we began playing and it was clear that there was no cohesion between the two of us but I let it continue until we both broke out in laughter. We picked it up again and, slowly, there began to be some cohesion between the two parts. We mostly took turns with taking a melody. It seemed that Ab might have not been the right key to play with in the first lesson. Even though the key of Ab was a challenge it was clear that she was beginning to listen to what was going on in the other part. She indicated earlier in the lesson that she couldn't keep the beat but it was obvious that she had a good sense of the beat when we were playing the chorales. It was inherent in her but she didn't realize it. She expressed to me, at the end of the first lesson, that she was expecting to read a jazz chart and then play an improvised solo like in a big band which is what most people think of when they hear the word 'improvisation.'

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I asked her how she felt about improvisation after this first lesson. She indicated to me that it wasn't as scary as she had originally thought and that it was just about playing "your own thing." I explained to her that the notes that she thought were 'wrong' would sound pretty good in the right place. If she was playing by herself there would be no reference of key. Before she left I mentioned the key of C to her and thought it might be an easy one to use as an alternate to Ab.

Lesson 2

In Lesson 2 she came equipped with a fingering chart for her flute as she was uncomfortable with not having the proper fingerings from last time. We started with a bit of a jam session with guitar and flute in the key of Bb as we did about half way through Lesson 1. This was used as a bit of a warm-up for the playing we were going to be doing and gave her a chance to just play and get rid of some of her inhibitions. I thought it was a much better way of getting started than with the long tones because she could practice her notes and come up with her own melodies at the same time. Also, when we were ready to go, she had already been in an 'improvising mode.' After this we tried a 'pass the melody' activity. I chose Mary Had A Little Lamb in the key of Bb and had her learn the melody on her flute. Once she felt comfortable that the tune was under her fingers we began playing a melody back and forth that may have closely resembled the original song or may not have resembled the song at all. The more we played the more she experimented with rhythm and pitch. At one point she said, "that didn't sound like Mary Had A Little Lamb at all!" I explained that ideas always come from somewhere and that it was just the material that we were using for our mini compositions. After this, we reviewed the key of C. It was clear that this was much easier for her. As well, this time she had a fingering chart to help her. We jammed in the key of C the same way we did with the key of Bb at the beginning of the lesson with me on guitar, playing a simple chord progression. Again, this was a much more interesting way to get her comfortable with playing in that key and to help her to overcome some more of her inhibitions about improvising. We jammed for a while and she stopped and mentioned that it seems like she is just going up and down the scale. I asked her again, like in the first lesson, to extend the scale for more notes. She tried this but was still somewhat dissatisfied. It seemed that she was quickly becoming less nervous about improvising and wanted to make her improvising a little more interesting. I asked her to add more skips and jumps into her playing – she did. I asked her how she felt after this and she was much more enthusiastic about her playing. I pointed out to her that it was likely because the listener would be more easily drawn into the music because she was playing more unexpectedly. From this, I showed her how to play a C pentatonic scale because there are natural skips and jumps built into it and explained that a lot of the most catchy tunes are based on pentatonic scales. We tried jamming again with C pentatonic. Once we were jamming for a bit I asked her to switch back to C major but to include some pentatonic patterns within it. At the end of this exercise I asked her which she liked the best, the pentatonic or the major scale patterns. She indicated that the pentatonic sounded better and that she liked playing it more than the major.

After this, we moved onto a long tone exercise with C pentatonic. This was meant to be the same as the warm-up exercise

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in the first lesson with flute and trombone. Because she had already been playing and thinking in C pentatonic, long tones in C pentatonic was a very simple task. It was quite apparent that she was comfortable with C pentatonic. After the exercise I asked her what she noticed. Right away she pointed out that everything sounded "pretty." I explained that because there are no semitones in the pattern it is impossible to find a harmony that doesn't sound good. At the end of the lesson she indicated that she was much less nervous than she was during lesson 1. This was likely because she was beginning to break down the barriers that got in the way of her improvising without 'ego.'

Lesson 3

Lesson 3 began with a C pentatonic jam with me on guitar. We tried it with a moderate tempo on a new chord progression. Then I changed the style and progression again to more of a slow, ballad-like feel and asked her to switch to C major but to combine the C pentatonic patterns that she had learned. After this we moved onto two part chorales with flute and trombone. These were the exercises that that we had tried in the first lesson. This time we were in C instead of Bb. I told her that we should play off each other. As we began it was obvious that we were already much more together and that she was listening much better than she had been previously. After, I asked her what she thought about it. She indicated right away that it "sounded much better than last time." Next, I asked her to let us try a different style. We played a much more up-beat style together. She was playing more passing tones that were out of key and not letting 'wrong' notes get in the way of her playing. We attempted a third time but I indicated to her that even though we might have been playing the same style, we were not necessarily playing the same song. I told her to steal ideas from me and I will steal ideas from her. As well, I explained, the notes don't have to be the same because even if you play the same rhythms and the same general melodic contour the song will sound more coherent. We changed to Bb for the last attempt. I thought it was about time to change key so that she wouldn't get too used to playing in one key. As we went along this time, it was clear that we were playing the same song. We were not only playing a lot of the same rhythms but we were even breathing in the same places and many other musical elements were borrowed. I asked her after this, "what style were we playing?" She indicated that it was classical more than anything, likely because this is what the both of us were used to. She indicated though that I was trying to "jazz it up" a bit. By this, she meant that I was using passing tones that weren't in the key and using rhythms that were not characteristic of the style. She couldn't indicate this into words herself but she did know that I was going beyond the Bb key. I was trying to experiment with some scales and rhythms. She was, very intently, listening to what I was doing and responding appropriately. I asked her to explain what she meant by 'jazzy,' and she was trying to explain it using 1 and 3 of the key. To me, what she was telling me was that she knew a bit about what made a

blues scale – the 1 and flat 3. I was going to tell her the formula for the blues scale but decided to explain it much more simplistically. I told her that to play in A blues all she had to do was play her C pentatonic scale starting on A and add an Eb between D and E. She picked it up fairly quickly and we decided to jam on A blues with me on guitar until the end of the session.

Lesson 4

Lesson 4 began with a jam in C with me on guitar. She was becoming much more comfortable with making 'mistakes' and trying new things. Her solos were sounding much more interesting and it was clear that there were not near as many inhibitions as there were in the first 3 sessions. The progression was I-vi-V-IV at a moderate tempo. Because she wasn't letting her 'ego' get in the way there was much more that she was able to do without really thinking about it. Next we switched styles to a more up-beat tempo with more of an obvious backbeat. She switched to pentatonic. The progression was I-IV-V7-I this time. She found it difficult to follow because of the really strong backbeat that I was playing. After this, we moved onto trombone and flute duets. I asked her to give me some adjectives and some places. Our first was a *shiny graveyard*. We agreed on a key just to get started because it was a new activity and I wanted her to be familiar with it. It was an interesting piece. My part didn't fit in with what she was doing. It seemed we were playing two very different songs at the same time. When I asked her if that was a *shiny graveyard* she responded that when she pictured a shiny graveyard she thought of a graveyard in the morning with the dew glistening in the sun. If you were to listen to her part she had a very good idea of what she was doing. Our next one was a *bouncy pool*. This one seemed to fit together much better and we were copying ideas from each other, making the piece much more coherent. We gathered a few more words and our final piece was a *spooky beach*. At this point I informed her that we didn't necessarily have to be in the same key giving us the ability to explore the instrument a little more. I thought since she was more familiar with the task that this was the next logical step. This one had more unity than the first two in terms of phrasing and ideas. We discussed how even though there was no real tonal centre, it still sounded like we were playing the same piece. We kept with the duets and moved onto a more 'free' two part chorale like we had been doing in previous lessons. The challenge was to create a piece of music that had unity and forced each other to listen. We established that we would pick a key but stray from it when it felt appropriate and just go by feel. I took the lead at the beginning and she was able to follow and copy some of the ideas that I was presenting. Later in our piece, it seemed that we moved to a much more legato, slower section where she was taking the lead. After this, I took it back into the ideas from the beginning so that our piece had an ABA form. Afterward we discussed what happened and talked about form.

Discussing Improvisation

At the end of the last session I asked her what she thought about improvisation now that we have had these 4 sessions. She said that she thought it was fun "as long as you are in the right environment where people aren't judging." She explained that we need to just "go and have fun and not worry about it." The second question I asked her was "if you were to pick up a flute again in a couple of years or next week, would you be more in-

clined to improvise?" She said that she would probably do a bit of both and try to learn other kinds of music on her flute. She added that after these 4 sessions she would definitely be much more willing to improvise and feel much more confident doing it. After the questioning she said, "this was fun." In the end, it seems that she knew more than she thought she did.

Conclusion

Much can be learned from my sister about teaching improvisation. First, it must be taught in such a way where mistakes are ok and expected. She said it herself, if there is an environment where people are not judging, then learning to improvise can be very fun. I never judged her on her playing, I just let her explore and experiment. She learned that there is no such thing as a mistake in improvisation. Second, improvisation is all about exploring and experimenting. Giving too many parameters can hinder creativity and cause frustration and boredom. Giving not enough can sometimes do the same. When she and I were exploring the music together we would usually agree on a key, theme or goal to get started so that the creative process could begin. As we got used to an activity or more comfortable with the key, she was encouraged to explore outside of those parameters. Also, as was referenced above, the three note call and response game from lesson 1 began to cause frustration and she naturally wanted to expand upon the limitations she was given; there may have been too many restraints. As well, when she was just using a major scale for her improvisations she became bored. Third, improvisation does not have to be jazz or blues and can happen with any two instruments *in any style*. Yes, even classical. She and I were able to demonstrate this. Improvisation is all about what sounds good and what feels good and does not necessarily have

to follow a set of rules at all. Fourthly, learning improvisation is a process. A baby learns to speak by exploring and experimenting with words and speech. Even if the baby is not making sense and using nonsense words it is still very important that the baby make these sounds and that they are encouraged to keep doing it. This is important so that they can learn how to put those sounds together into words on their own. Improvisation works in the *exact same way*, what comes out at the beginning might not sound good but the more a student is given the opportunity to explore and experiment in a non-judgemental environment, and is encouraged to do so, the better and more coherent the music sounds over time. Lastly, stealing ideas is ok. Stealing and borrowing ideas from another person is what makes creativity flourish. All ideas come from somewhere. Borrowing is also what makes two parts fit together to make a more coherent piece of music. Improvisation and creativity needn't be formalized nor planned, students just need to be given the opportunity and it is our job as music teachers to facilitate this and encourage students to take risks and create their *own* music.

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accessible music education for sightless students

A Sightless Musician's Battle with a Mild Hearing Loss

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Abstract: The theme of this paper is to bring forward the issue of a sightless musician with a mild hearing loss; who can be viewed as occupying three connecting positions. These are the practitioner, the teacher, and the performer. Each of these individuals, combined together, describe a person who is battling the effects of dealing with the identification of now having a mild hearing loss. Each person in their position (practitioner, teacher and performer), must face the difficulties that come with this level of hearing loss. Therefore, this paper offers suggestions and guid-

ance in the hopes that they may work to regain their musical competence, self-satisfaction, self-confidence and professionalism. The ultimate disclosure reveals how the threefold sightless musician finds uplifting resolution in the joy of the art of music itself.

What happens when a sightless musician encounters a mild hearing loss? How does this affect his/her physical, emotional, social and intellectual responses? How does this diagnosis impact his/her abilities to practice, teach, and perform? These are

