Improvising to Learn/Learning to Improvise: Designing Scaffolded Group Improvisations for the Music Theory Classroom

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Improvisation is music theory and ear training with immediacy. The command of theoretical concepts required to create music in the moment, combined with the necessary abilities to hear internally and recognize what is being performed by others, make improvisation an ideal activity for all theory classrooms. As a result of the integration of complex skills required by improvisation, it is important that activities be scaffolded, or supported by constraints and preparatory activities, before being attempted. Even more importantly, improvisation is a creative and fun activity for engaging with music theory. Using improvisation to teach theory has been receiving growing recognition, as evinced by its inclusion in recent aural skills texts by Jones and Shaftel, Phillips, Piper Clendinning, and West Marvin, and Rogers and Ottman. What these approaches do not typically focus on, however, are group improvisations. When improvising together, students engage their audiation, recognition, and creative skills simultaneously while forging stronger musical and social bonds. By placing well scaffolded group improvisations at the center of theory and ear training curricula, students will gain a deeper and more personal understanding of theoretical concepts that they will carry into their lives and careers as musicians.

Improvisation is an activity that simultaneously develops and integrates the two
fundamental aural skills emphasized by most curricula: recognition and audiation, or what Michael Rogers called “the understanding ear and the hearing mind” (2004). In traditional aural skills instruction, recognition is developed primarily through passive listening activities like interval and chord identification, dictation, and transcription, and audiation through sight-singing. Kate Covington described these teaching methods as “objectivist” and argued that improvisation is a “constructivist” approach that allows students to construct their own knowledge through context-rich activities. Improvising in group settings therefore requires recognition and audition to be employed simultaneously. During an improvisation, students must decide on what to play, audiate the materials internally, perform these materials externally, and then evaluate whether or not what came out was what they intended. Well designed group improvisations activate the recognition skill by requiring students to listen to each other, incorporating the contributions of the whole group before deciding on their next utterance. Furthermore, improvisation facilitates what Steve Larson termed “integrated music learning”: the “aural, vocal, visual, intellectual, digital, kinesthetic, and emotional understanding of musical relationships” (1995). By designing activities that require interactive listening, group improvisations can effectively develop audiation and recognition together, as well as multiple modes of understanding that span both the mind and body.

To illustrate how a common improvisation activity can be improved through scaffolding and group performance, consider the following: A student is given a simple harmonic progression in a key, such as I–IV–V–I with one chord per bar, and instructed to improvise a melody that makes the progression audible to a listener. Achieving success at this activity requires precise knowledge of key, chords, scales, nonchord tones, patterns of metric emphasis, and melodic aesthetics. In a similar manner to the preparatory steps offered by species counterpoint, the following scaffolding will help students synthesize this knowledge and prepare them to perform it in real time:

1. Use root pitches of each chord only. Improvise simple rhythmic motives on each root. This step helps students internalize the harmonic rhythm of the progression.
2. Sing/play chordal arpeggiation of each harmony together. Students will begin to hear the harmony extending into time, making the vertical horizontal.
3. Sing/play scales based off of each harmony. With a simple I–IV–V–I progression...
these scales would all come from the same tonic scale, but would begin on each chord’s root pitch. This activity aims to fill in the gaps between chord tones.

4. Improvise using only chord tones. By limiting students’ choices, they can focus on anticipating and making the change from one chord to the next. Students can also focus on developing rhythmic and melodic motives with a reduced pitch palette.

5. Continue focusing on chord tones, but add in passing and neighboring tones. Improvisations based on scales can result in a lack of chord-tone emphasis, so this step widens the pitch gamut without resulting in meandering scales. Nonchord tones should appear on offbeats as much as possible, keeping the chord tones metrically emphasized.

6. Improvise freely using a combination of the above strategies.

Adding in a group dimension pushes the activity even further. Ask a second student to accompany the first at the piano using the same chord progression. At first this student might sustain the chords in simple block voicings, but later on he or she should try out various accompanimental patterns (e.g. Alberti bass). Eventually, the accompanist should adapt his or her playing to fit the style of the melodist. Through close listening, the accompanist will learn to mimic dynamic levels, manner of articulation, and musical style, and to fill in gaps in the texture by supplying more active utterances. To further challenge recognition, allow the students to interactively determine a chord sequence from a specified menu (e.g. I, IV, and V). This activity requires extremely close listening between the two improvisers in order to pick up on cues indicating each new chord. Particularly for the melodist, this activity requires careful attention to metrical emphasis and voice leading connections in order to make the chord change audible and obvious to the accompanist. A number of scaffolds will help:

1. Specify a harmonic rhythm (e.g. one chord per bar). Students will know when to expect a change and can prepare to listen for these moments.

2. Give specific harmonic constraints by limiting the harmonic palette and designating which chords are available to follow each other. This will reduce the number of options for students to keep foremost in their consciousness, giving them fewer to choose from or to expect. Larson’s concept of menus, maps, and models is a particularly good way to structure these harmonic
3. Designate a leader and follower. One student will be the sole determiner of what chord will come next while the other will focus entirely on recognizing the change and adapting to it. Even if these roles are not determined in advance, instructing students to consider their role in the process of improvising is very helpful.

4. Instruct the rest of class to hum root pitches. This will simultaneously engage the recognition capabilities of the observers, offer the improvisers a stronger harmonic foundation, and give the improvisers feedback on whether they are making each chord as clear as possible.

The improvisation activity I have been discussing can be used across an entire theory sequence by adding in harmonic complexity as it is introduced. As students practice it semester to semester, they will increase their harmonic vocabularies and reduce their need for scaffolds. I find this to be an essential activity for ingraining principles of harmonic progression in students and an ideal example of the constructivist principles inherent in improvisation. In order to give an idea of the broad range of theoretical concepts that benefit from being taught through improvisation, here are three activities to consider using in theory classes:

1. Ad-lib chorale: Give a group of four or five students a Roman-numeral progression and assign each a starting note in the first chord. On cue, each student should follow the smoothest voice-leading path to the next chord. Once there, the group should listen and evaluate: Are there any incorrect notes? Are any chord members missing? Did any parallels result from the voice-leading paths chosen? Were any tendency tones frustrated? Continue through the progression and discuss. An advanced version of this improvisation might work from a palette of harmonies that another student points to, creating the progression on the fly.

2. Pulse to meter: Using a scale, key, or chord, begin with one student performing a regular pulse on a repeating pitch. Have two additional students improvise over this pulse with freer durational content. These two should work together to create a specified meter from the pulse. They must determine how they will interpret the pulse (beat level, above, or below) and what means they will use to emphasize measure groups (e.g. consonance with pulse pitch, durational accent, phenomenal accent) either beforehand or, with sufficient practice, in
the moment. Work towards changing to a different meter in the course of the improvisation, reinterpreting the pulse in a new way.

3. Debussy/modal jazz textures: Using a predetermined sequence of scales or modes, instruct a group of four students to improvise using those scales, shifting from one to the next when initiated by one of the students. This requires close listening and intimate familiarity with the intervallic makeup of scale in relationship to the others. Designating leaders and followers can be a helpful scaffold, as well as assigning ensemble roles like bass, accompaniment, and melodic soloist.

With the goal of engaging students using complex, real-world, constructivist teaching methods, no tool is of greater value than improvisation. The complexity of improvisation is both a blessing and a curse, however, making the thoughtful creation of scaffolds even more essential. Group activities with clearly defined roles and constraints provide inexperienced students structure and peer support, helping them to overcome the hesitancy many feel towards improvisation. Moreover, improvising in group settings closely mimics a real-world music making context. As students are improvising to learn theoretical concepts, many of them will also be learning to improvise, and thus scaffolded group improvisations will give them the support needed in order to integrate music theory into their lives as musicians.

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