

Eric Tremblay
Dr. Watson
3810A
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Improvisation

Introduction

Music improvisation can be defined as the real-time creative performance of music and consists of inventing music extemporaneously. Improvisation is a discovery act that goes beyond the application of a preexisting technique and aims to delineate an original framework. This lesson on improvisation consists of scaffolding instruction which is based on keeping the students attention focused on critical aspects of the task and dividing the task at hand into smaller chunks and providing tools for each of these chunks. The three main 'chunks' I will be dividing this lesson into that are critical to improvisation are theory, vocabulary and style.

Structure

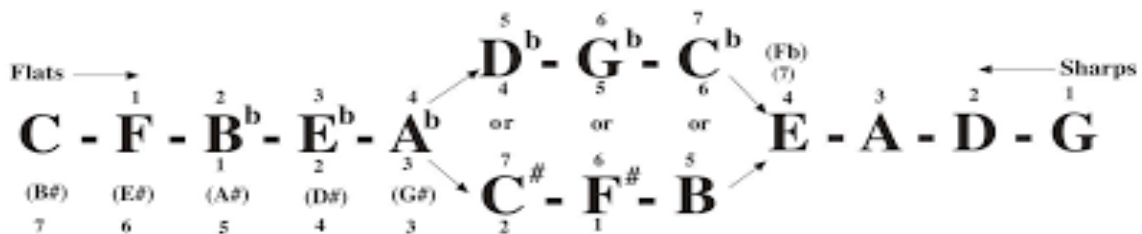
Model Correct Performance Task

Before learning this skill it is important for the student to fully understand what is expected from them by giving them an example of what an improvisation sounds like, this can be done by showing them a solo by a famous musician on their instrument or you can improvise yourself while playing along to a backing track to show them what the skill consists of and explaining why you're making the choices you're making when playing.

Theory

To begin learning this skill it is important to be familiar with the theory behind it as this is what we base the melodies off of. We can start off by solidifying the students understanding of major scales, a good tool for practicing major scales is the circle of fourths, this gives the student a visual representation of the letter names of the keys and allows them to associate them with the scales of those keys. It is also a good tool for students to learn their scales if they're not already familiar with them as it indicates how many sharps or flats

are in the keys. There are many ways to use the circle of fourths other than just for scales, for example have the student play through each key and play only the 3rd scale degree, and then the next time they do it have them play only the 5th scale degree, etc., this forces them to think in the different keys and familiarize themselves with the notes in every key. Since the circle of fourths is in concert pitch, this will also serve as a transposition exercise for transposing instrument players as it forces them to think of the key in relation to their instrument, this is important because the chords will appear in concert pitch in their music and this exercise trains them to transpose quickly on the spot.



The top number indicates the number of flats or sharps in that particular scale.
The bottom number indicates the correct order of flats or sharps.

Vocabulary

With the fundamental understanding of the major keys this will facilitate the learning process for the students in the following step. The next step of improvisation is vocabulary. Vocabulary or 'licks' are important as they give the student material to use within their solos, this makes it easier for beginners because it takes away the most stressful aspect of

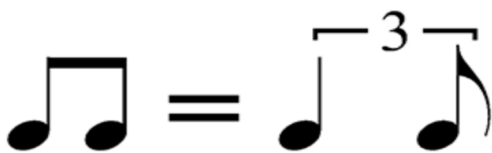


improvising which is creating melodies and gives them tools to base their improvisations off of. To give the students a visual reference, provide them with a compilation of 'licks' such as the one I have provided. As time progresses they may start to use less of the licks provided and create their own or incorporate them in more creative ways. An exercise to do using this

would be to play each lick in all the majors keys, this serves as a transposition exercise as well as allows the student to practice putting them into context.

Style

The next most important aspect of improvisation is style. In many jazz charts swing is a very popular style that musicians often incorporate in their solos. In order to properly teach swing the student should be given an audio example from a jazz chart. Since it is hard to explain it's best the students learn by listening as it is something that is felt rather than taught. If the student cannot grasp the concept it is also possible to explain it from a theoretical perspective by showing them the illustration below which consists of a pattern of constant eighth notes with the first eighth note having a tenuto and the second having an accent, or a quarter eighth note triplet. Have the student practice scales and licks using each of these rhythms which will result in them playing in swing without them realising it. This concept can also be described verbally as 'doo-bah-doo-bah', saying this allows the student to hear and internalize the swing feel in a simple way making it easier to replicate on their instrument.



Application

Using the knowledge thus far the student should be able to apply the basic concepts they have learnt into the context of actually improvising. A good way to start students off is by having them play the 12 bar blues. This is a series of 12 bars switching between 3 chords in any key which introduces the idea of key changes to the student in a fairly simple and repetitive way. An exercise you can do with this is to have students play the tonic of the chord in each bar as a whole note, this teaches them how to switch between chords in a very simple way. The next step would be to add one of the 'licks' provided by the teacher to one of the bars while playing whole notes in every other bar, this makes it easy for the student as they don't have to stress about creating a melody that sounds good and can simply focus on playing in the right key and applying their knowledge of vocabulary. In this instance they are improvising in the simplest form, however they are still improvising. To expand on this over time, the student can start playing stepwise melodies with their knowledge of the major scales and after that they can start creating more complex melodies by experimenting and receiving feedback on how to improve.

12 Bar Blues

The image shows a 12-bar blues progression in 4/4 time, represented by three staves of musical notation. Each staff contains four bars, with a whole rest in each bar. The chord symbols are as follows:

- Staff 1 (Bars 1-4): I, I, I, I
- Staff 2 (Bars 5-8): IV, IV, I, I
- Staff 3 (Bars 9-12): V, IV, I, V

Conclusion

These strategies relate to the theoretical concept of the zone of proximal development as they allow the student to progress slightly beyond their current skills and perform the task using the tools and instructions provided by the teacher that facilitate the task such as the circle of fourths and the 12 bar blues model. The next step for them would be to improvise without these tools, the scaffolding can be modified overtime by adding onto the concepts

covered, for example, incorporating minor keys, having the student incorporate more licks into their improvisations, deviating from the 12 bar blues structure and apply their knowledge to other more complex chord progressions, etc. The modification of scaffolding depends on the progression of the individual student and can vary depending on how fast they learn, once the student has nearly mastered the skill the teacher can then gradually remove the scaffolding which allows the student to work independently.