

# Improvisation in Music

---

Its History, Benefits, and Methods for Instruction

**Leah Harmon**

**5/7/2015**

For centuries, improvisation played an important role in Western music cultures. It was an expected music-making skill and used for self-expression and entertainment in everyday life. Improvisation dates back to the Middle-Ages when it was used during Gregorian chant in sacred church music. These chants began as syllabic settings of the text meaning that one syllable was sung per pitch. They gradually were embellished through improvisation to make the phrases melismatic, or singing one syllable over a series of several notes.<sup>1</sup> Later, in the Baroque era, improvisation was required by keyboardists to “‘realize’ figured bass on the spot by improvising notes above a given bass line.”<sup>2</sup> In the Classical era, virtuoso soloists would improvise the cadenzas of concertos during performances. Not only that, but a countless number of famous composers’ works throughout the Baroque, Classical and early Romantic time periods are assumed to have originated as improvisations. Improvisation began to take the back-burner in favor of literal performance of compositions towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Although improvisation’s importance has declined in most Western music it still remains central to many other musical traditions including blues, jazz and numerous African and Asian ethnicities. Presently, improvisation is only associated with jazz music. Many musicians respond fearfully when asked to improvise. Many students never experience improvisation until they become involved in college jazz ensembles or are more experienced musicians and then find themselves completely unprepared and crippled by fear. This is largely due to the absence of improvisation training in our public music education and private lessons. However, studies show that improvisation holds significant value for musicians, beginners and experts alike. Bill

---

<sup>1</sup> "Melismatic style." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18333>.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, Julie, K. “Me? Teach Improvisation to Children?,” *General Music Today* 20, no. 2. p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Dobbins makes a thought-provoking comparison between using verbal language and musical improvisation as forms of self-expression and communication.

To achieve true clarity of expression, however, a highly proficient command of language is necessary. 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.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to define improvisation as “the spontaneous expression of musical images that directly reflect the immediate ideas, emotions, and sensations of the improviser.”<sup>5</sup> Another way to explain improvisation is “the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously.”<sup>6</sup> Both definitions begin shed light on why improvisation is an important skill for musicians.

In recent years, a renewed interest in improvisation has sprung up, largely due to the popularity of jazz. However, its reestablishment into our Western music culture, chiefly concerned with re-creating historically accurate works of figure-head composers, has been sluggish. Research has revealed a lack of knowledge on how to teach improvisation effectively and include it in the teaching curriculum both in public music education and private lesson settings. Unequipped instructors quietly kick improvisation under the table and use what precious and limited time they do have with students focusing on other, equally important aspects of music. However, if improvisation is never taught, many people who do not pursue music as a career will simply cease playing at all. Lee Evans states that “one of the principle goals of music instruction must be to impart basic musical tools that students may employ for enrichment and pleasure, of which improvisation is an important tool.”<sup>7</sup> Improvisation is a way to keep music playing relevant, no matter where a person finds themselves in life. It opens up

---

<sup>4</sup> Dobbins, Bill. “Improvisation: An Essential Element of Musical Proficiency,” *Music Educators Journal* vol. 66, no. 5 (Jan., 1980), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Beckstead, David. “Improvisation: Thinking and Playing Music.” *Music Educators Journal*, 99 (2013) 69-74.

<sup>7</sup> Chyu, Yawen Eunice. “Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels.” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2004, p. 7.

possibilities for self-expression, playing from lead sheets, getting involved in church worship band, learning songs by ear and simply sitting down at the piano and making beautiful music without relying on a score. Lee Evans goes on to argue that “if students are taught to employ their musical knowledge to express their own ideas, it is possible that piano playing will become their life-long hobby instead of abandoning it too early.”<sup>8</sup> Too often, piano students will give up on piano lessons when life gets busy and they lose interest. Later in life, they regret not pursuing this skill any further. Improvisation is a simple way to keep piano lessons relevant and practical in a generation where it is losing its place of significance.

This paper, directed specifically towards private piano teachers, will delve deeper into the numerous benefits improvisation can have on musicians regardless of where they are in their education. It will explore advantages such as creativity and musical expression, improved technique, aural skills and sight reading ability, musical social interaction and using improvisation to assess one’s musical skills. This paper will also discuss simple techniques teachers can use to include improvisation in their piano students’ musical education that will encourage playing the piano as a life-long hobby. Many of these activities and techniques are ones that I have incorporated into my lessons plans with my own two students in the past two years. I have seen my students begin to develop improvisation skills and become more comfortable exploring new sounds on the piano. In particular, my nine-year-old student has become increasingly more engaged in our lessons. Learning improvisation has piqued his interest in playing the piano and given him the freedom to be creative.

The first way that improvisation benefits the pianist is it provides an outlet for creativity and self-expression. It helps students learn the tools necessary to express music that is uniquely their own. The keyboard becomes a space where their personal ideas are significant. Students

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

often value and find deep pride in their improvisations in a way that is different than playing a notated piece of music. Being allowed to be creative and make their own music is often motivational and provides an incentive for them to continue learning. If pianists are given the tools to improvise and continue to cultivate the skill of creating their own music, they will be able to sit down at a piano at any given time and play something that is beautiful. If improvisation is never learned, music-making is limited to times when notated music is available to read. This skill makes piano playing a hobby for people who are unable to continue lessons throughout their entire life. Music is full of emotion and improvisation allows the musician to express themselves, and completely engage in their music.

Other benefits improvisation produces are improved technique, aural skills, and sight-reading ability. Young students, especially, will struggle to play with the proper technique because they are so focused on playing notated music correctly. However, when they are allowed to play whatever they feel, they can instead pay attention to their hand position and other technical aspects of how the sound is produced. Aural skills are developed because improvisation requires intently listening to the music they create and formulating how it will continue to expand. Improvisation involves audiation, which is:

the musical equivalent of thinking in language. When we listen to someone speak we must retain in memory their vocal sounds long enough to recognize and give meaning to the words the sounds represent. Likewise, when listening to music we are at any given moment organizing in audiation sounds that were recently heard. We also predict, based on our familiarity with the tonal and rhythmic conventions of the music being heard, what will come next.<sup>9</sup>

Audiation gives them the opportunity to fully engage in the music in a deeper way because it removes the barrier that notated music might become. Improvisation also especially improves student's ability to sight read because they both involve thinking in motion and being able to

---

<sup>9</sup> The Gordon Institute for Music Learning. "Audiation." Accessed April 30, 2015, <http://giml.org/mlt/audiation/>

play without stopping no matter what happens. Also, improvisation, like sight-reading, calls for intense concentration, planning for what is ahead, an internal rhythm and tempo, and not correcting any errors they may make. Pianists who improvise develop the habit of looking for and creating patterns in music, which is an ability used in sight-reading as well. Improvisation is a fresh approach to cultivating these important capacities in pianists and will impact their playing in more than one way.

Improvisation also provides opportunities for social interaction using music. This is especially significant in public music education, but still holds value in both group and private piano lessons. In recent years, many teachers have begun to hold group piano lessons on a regular basis with their private pupils. This opens up possibilities for interactive music games, friendly competition and group learning. Improvisation is another useful tool for group piano because the students will take turns improvising, listen to what others create, and musically react to what they hear. This develops good listening and communication skills in a musical setting. Another way to facilitate improvisation is by having the students verbally plan out improvisations before they begin. Doing this builds unity, encourages collective decision-making, celebrates risk-taking and promotes the value of being musical together. Improvisation is also useful in a private, one-on-one setting with the student and the teacher. It provides a platform for the teacher and student to interact on a more equal level and have fun engaging in music together. Improvisation as a “form of communication through music teaches children to listen, to assess, and to be intuitive. Few other course curricula at the elementary level call for the use of all of these skills.”<sup>10</sup>

On occasion, teachers may struggle to determine whether or not a student fully comprehends musical concepts. Improvisation offers an effective means to assess students’

---

<sup>10</sup> Scott, p. 12.

musical skills because a genuine understanding and internalization of musical concepts is required to create music. Experimentation at the keyboard develops an understanding of and feeling for musical elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, meter and form.<sup>11</sup> If students have a true grasp on a musical concept, they should be able to incorporate it into their improvisations. This will indicate whether or not they have an internalized musical vocabulary because they can express their musical ideas spontaneously.

Learning how to improvise obviously has many advantages. However, many music educators, never being taught to improvise themselves, are still unequipped to include it in their teaching. The rest of this paper will identify and discuss many simple techniques on how to include improvisation specifically in private piano lessons.

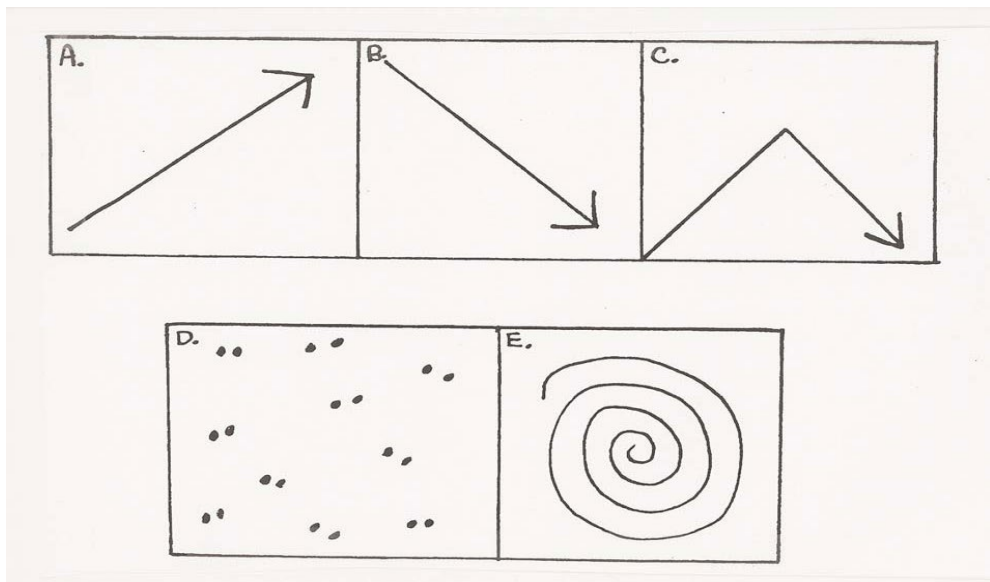
John Kratus concludes that there are seven levels of improvisation. These are: Exploration, process-oriented improvisation, product-oriented improvisation, fluid improvisation, structural improvisation, stylistic improvisation and personal improvisation. The first three of these levels are most commonly found in the majority of pre-college piano students and Julie Scott discusses them in detail. The first level, exploration, is when students experiment with different sounds and combinations of notes in a free context with few guidelines. In these beginning stages, no audiation is happening as of yet, however, exploration helps develop audiation. The sounds produced by students may seem random and sound as if they lack purpose. However, the level of exploration is only the beginning and an important stage in learning to improvise. There are many techniques for teachers to use to help their students explore new sounds at the keyboard.

There are many different activities that can be used with students that are in the exploration stage. Julie Scott, in her article *Me? Teach Improvisation to Children*, suggests

---

<sup>11</sup> Chyu, p. 4-5.

letting the student explore contrasting sounds on the piano. For example, the child might be instructed to play something high and then low, loud and then soft, fast and then slow, or moving up and then down. One way to visually engage the student is to prompt them using pictures. They may begin by interpreting the symbols or pictures using their voices and then begin to explore similar sounds on the piano once they are comfortable. Some of the symbols Scott suggests are:



12

I have experimented with Scott's idea with my own seven-year-old student and it had substantial results. He remained fully engaged with the activity and had fun experimenting with different sounds on the keyboard. This activity was good for him because he is a visual learner, so using pictures to prompt him to explore the piano made him feel more comfortable.

Another way to encourage exploring new sounds is to take the lead and improvise alongside your students. For example, the teacher could sit with their student and start to improvise a simple rhythmic pattern only using the black keys. The student should be encouraged to listen to what their teacher is playing and join in playing whatever they want whenever they are ready. This way they are not the only one playing and will not feel as shy in

---

<sup>12</sup> Scott, p. 9.



exploring new sounds. Along the same lines is using call-and-response improvisation. In this type of activity, the teacher will play a short melody with a simple rhythm. After listening to what the teacher is playing, the student should musically respond to what their teacher played. This activity can start very simply by only using a few notes and quarter notes and half notes for the rhythm. However, as the child begins to develop and move into Process-Oriented Improvisation, this activity is one that can be made more difficult.

Depending on how far along students may be in their theory training, the exploration stage may be a good time to begin talking about the sound difference between major and minor scales and chords. It is never too soon to begin developing a student's listening and aural skills. I was amazed at how well my nine-year-old student was able to hear the difference between major and minor chords and scales already. Another simple theory lesson to have with them early on is defining the tonic and dominant notes of any scale. This will help them explore ways to end their improvisations that sound unfinished or that indicate finality.

The second level of improvisation is Process-Oriented. During this stage, students begin to make connections between the motor movements and the resulting sounds that they achieve. Their improvisations begin to gain purpose and organization and they begin to use patterns in their playing. In this stage the teacher can begin to administer more structure and guidelines for their students to follow.

This stage of improvisation brings more variety to the type of activities available. It is very common to begin providing a specific rhythm which the student must follow when improvising a melody. Determining what rhythm they should adhere to can be as simple as jotting down a four beat combination of eighth, quarter and half notes. However, I can guarantee that the more creativity that is used in deciding on the rhythm, the more the child will stay

engaged. One simple trick is to use the syllables of words to determine the rhythm used. A creative way to do this is by collecting an assortment of colorful paint samples. These paint chips generally have four different colored boxes on them, all with creative names. Your piano students will be drawn in by all the colors. Let them choose their favorite strip, and use the color names to determine the rhythm that will be used. For example, “Poppy Red” would turn into two eighth notes and a quarter note. Write the appropriate rhythm in each colored square of the strip and practice clapping them while saying the paint chip name out loud. Next, have them improvise a melody while following the rhythm provided by the paint chip. They will be more attentive to the rhythm they are assigned if it is written on something as colorful as a paint swatch and using the color’s exciting names is more fun than simply writing out a rhythm on a piece of notebook paper.<sup>13</sup>

Another way to do this is by using syllables from the words of familiar poems or nursery rhymes. Julie Scott formulates a rhythm using this system.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Traditional

14

The important thing when using this method is that the student must memorize the rhythm thoroughly before attempting to improvise a melody to it. This can be done easily by using a step-by-step process. First, have the student speak the poem in rhythm until they know it by heart. Next, have them pat the rhythm on their lap, alternating their hands, while speaking the words. Once they have proven that they know the rhythm well enough, have them play the rhythm on the piano, but limit the number of notes they can use. As they continue to improve,

<sup>13</sup> *Teach Piano Today*. <http://www.teachpianotoday.com/2014/08/10/by-the-end-of-this-post-youll-be-teaching-improv-to-piano-students-as-young-as-five/>

<sup>14</sup> Scott, 10.

change and add different notes into the mix, give dynamic and tempo guidelines, and encourage them to experiment with articulation markings that they have learned in their lesson books.

The third level is called Product-Oriented Improvisation. When students attain this level there are two major changes that occur. First of all, their awareness of music in their environment is heightened. They pay attention to the patterns and different features they hear in the music around them and begin to structure their own improvisations to reflect those stylistic traits. The second thing that changes in this level is that they become aware that music is something to be shared with others and that it is a valued product. They begin to be able to maintain a steady beat, play within a specific meter and play with consistent tonality and phrasing. Students begin to make references to other musical pieces and styles and their performance technique begins to improve. Teachers are able to give further structure to the improvisation assignments such as following a specific form or chord progression.

During this stage of improvisation, audiation and aural skills should be well enough developed that the student could begin learning songs by ear. When first learning pieces by ear, it is good to begin with tunes that are familiar such as: “Happy Birthday,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “Jingle Bells,” or “Hot Cross Buns.” Students should start by learning the piece in C Major position, to avoid any confusion with having to use black keys. A good first step is to have the student sing the tune aloud before playing it on the piano. This will ensure that they will learn it right the first time and save having to correct any mistakes down the road. Once they have mastered the song, have them begin to transpose it to other keys. Doing this does not require explaining key signatures to them. They should be able to tell aurally when a black note is needed. To enhance this task, eventually have the student experiment different accompanying chords that they can play with the melody. This will allow them begin improvising an

appropriate accompaniment to the songs, which can open up doors to playing pop music or from lead sheets.

Learning how to play from a lead sheet, also known as a chord chart, is a skill that can begin to be developed during, or soon after Product-Oriented improvisation. Students will need to have a solid understanding of how to play chords and their inversions in order to play from a lead sheet. However, playing from a lead sheet could be a person's personal goal of learning improvisation. This is a useful skill because it will allow them to play a wide variety of pop music, keyboard in a worship band, or just play for fun. In order to better understand how to learn to play from lead sheets, I consulted a friend who has had much experience improvising from lead sheets named Lisa Qualsett. Lisa is an accomplished singer, pianist and composer. She has even produced her own CD. She often leads the worship band at my church and improvises at the piano from lead sheets. Lisa also has begun to teach other teenagers and adults how to improvise as well. After our meeting, I was able to gain a better understanding on the aspects involved and how to go about teaching and learning this skill.

Lisa Qualsett states that there are four main components that are involved in improvising from a lead sheet: melody, chords, rhythm and ornamentations (countermelodies, motifs, grace notes, etc.). When first starting to learn a song, it is imperative to be familiar with the melody of the piece. In the beginning stages, the student should play the melody in the right hand while using the left hand to play the chords indicated on the lead sheet. Obviously, the student should be familiar with all of the chords used. However, if they are not, this may provide a useful opportunity to teach them new chords. Once they can play the melody with the written accompanying chords, the next step is to begin to experiment with a new chord progression that can fit underneath the melody. Chords can be used creatively through inversions and arpeggios

and to give a more interesting color to the melody. Eventually, a certain adherence to the appropriate rhythm must be developed. The sense of rhythm and pulse is largely determined by the left hand accompaniment. If the melody is written in duple meter, the accompaniment should not use triple meter. This will weaken the rhythmic pulse and cause confusion for the player as well as the audience. Eventually, the pianist should begin to break away from and let go of the melody. Instead of playing it exactly as written, experiment with countermelodies, adding grace notes, or filling in longer notes with different motifs that remain within the key signature or are passing tones to the next phrase or note.

As a student's level of comfort increases, they should continue to listen and experiment with different sounds. However, experimentation should eventually be purposeful and intentional. Expert improvisers have a large toolbox filled with tried chord progressions, rhythmic accompaniments, and melodic patterns and motifs that they can pull from in a variety of musical settings. Their toolbox is only filled because they have intentionally listened, experimented, and stored away the knowledge.

Improvisation is a skill that needs to be taught regularly in private piano lessons and other settings of music education. Since improvisation was such an integral part of Western music history, it should still hold importance in today's society. It provides a way for teachers to assess their students' musical knowledge and ability, helps develop aural skills and also requires many of the same abilities as sight reading. Improvisation also offers an opportunity for social interaction between other students and the teacher. Most importantly, improvisation paves the way for students to make piano a life-long hobby by being a form of self-expression and creativity, and expanding the opportunities available to students that do not choose music as their professional career. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, "music is the universal

language of mankind.”<sup>15</sup> Improvisation enables all humans with any level of musical ability to engage in making music and to express themselves through it. For these reasons, it is a skill that must become important in our society once again.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Brainy Quote*. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrywadsw379339.html>

## Works Cited

Beckstead, David. "Improvisation: Thinking and Playing Music." *Music Educators Journal*, 99 (2013) 69-74.

*Brainy Quote*. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrywadsw379339.html>

Chyu, Yawen Eunice. "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels." PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2004.

Dobbins, Bill. "Improvisation: An essential element of musical proficiency." *Music Educators Journal* vol. 66, no. 5 (Jan., 1980), pp. 36-41.

"Melismatic style." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18333>.

Scott, Julie K. "Me? Teach Improvisation to Children?." *General Music Today* 20 (2007) 2: 6-13.

*Teach Piano Today*. <http://www.teachpianotoday.com/2014/08/10/by-the-end-of-this-post-youll-be-teaching-improv-to-piano-students-as-young-as-five/>

The Gordon Institute for Music Learning. "Audiation." Accessed April 30, 2015, <http://giml.org/mlt/audiation/>