

THE LOST ART OF IMPROVISATION:
TEACHING IMPROVISATION
TO CLASSICAL PIANISTS

by

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ABSTRACT

Musical improvisation is an art that was practiced by the majority of keyboard masters and pedagogues of the past. Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt, and many others improvised during public performance and encouraged improvisation among their students. In today's music world, however, classical pianists are rarely comfortable improvising; as a result, they avoid teaching improvisatory skills at all levels, including in higher education facilities. Logically, if the teacher is not comfortable with improvisation, no attempt should be made to teach the art. Improvisation, however, is still a useful skill in the twenty-first century and should become a regular part of a classical pianist's training.

This study primarily provides methods through which classical pianists can learn the fundamentals of improvisation and acquire the ability to teach improvisation to their students. These methods are useful to both student and teacher. Classical pianists must learn the foundations of improvisation in order to prevent the loss of an art that was once valuable to the historical masters of the keyboard and can be equally so to pianists today.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is an art that was used by the majority of keyboard masters and pedagogues of the past. Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Liszt, and many others both improvised during public performance and encouraged improvisation among their students. In today's musical world, however, as the foundation of critical judgment of a performance of classical music has become adherence to the printed score, the art of improvisation has been preserved primarily among jazz and popular-music pianists.¹ Rarely is improvisation a common practice of classical pianists of the twenty-first century.

Within music schools and conservatories of higher education, where private piano lessons tend to be most influential, students are rarely taught improvisation unless they participate in the jazz programs of their schools. I believe improvisation is a valuable tool that all pianists should know how to use (as will be discussed later in chapter 1).

With this document, my overarching goal is to provide piano teachers in higher education facilities with methods to teach improvisation to their students. Some students do not improvise because their teachers do not improvise; therefore, these methods can also be used to help teachers learn to improvise.² Improvisation is not meant to take the place of a student's regular study of specific repertoire. I believe that improvisation will actually benefit a student's study of notated works.

¹ Romero, interview.

² This discovery was made upon surveying over thirty classically trained pianists from around the world. I conducted the survey myself but since the survey results were anonymous, the participants' names will not be listed.

After a short introduction defining improvisation, showing its history, and explaining its benefits to the classically trained pianist, I will approach various methods that teachers can use to help their students learn to improvise. After all, if Bach, Beethoven, and Liszt treated improvisation as a valuable asset for a keyboardist, we as piano teachers should do the same.

What is Improvisation?

At its most basic definition, musical improvisation includes any part of music that is created by the performer during the moment of performance. This can include subtle changes in tempo or dynamics, various ornamentations, rubato, exact articulation, balance, contour, etc. Interpretation, essentially, involves improvisation. Many of the elements just listed may be decided in advance, but often they change slightly during actual performance.

Everyday speech is a form of improvisation. As adults, we have learned our language and its societal use so well that we can speak any phrase in a variety of ways. Because we have learned to use the basics of our language, we can create these various phrases with little or no preparation:

- The sky is blue.
- The sky certainly is a beautiful blue today!
- Have you ever seen such a gorgeous blue sky?
- Look! Not a cloud in the sky! Just blue everywhere you look.
- That's got to be the loveliest blue sky I have ever seen!
- Blue, blue, blue. That's all I can see.³

In a similar fashion, many performers will play the same piece, but will express it in a slightly different way with each performance. The changes that take place between performances reveal

³ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 1.

the presence of improvisation, whether the performer realizes this fact or not. One can judge a classical performance by how closely it follows the score. Comparing scores with performances will quickly show areas of improvisation that are tucked inside current-day classical performances.⁴

As one would expect, improvisation also includes the creation of an entire piece of music during live performance in a seemingly spontaneous manner. Carl Czerny (student of Beethoven, teacher of Liszt, and famous keyboard pedagogue of the nineteenth-century) defined improvisation in this manner:

The talent and the art of improvising consist in the spinning out, during the very performance, on the spur of the moment, and without special immediate preparation, of each original or even borrowed idea into a sort of musical composition which, albeit in much freer form than a written work, nevertheless must be fashioned into an organized totality as far as is necessary to remain comprehensible and interesting.⁵

Improvisation allows the personal creativity of a performer to be released through the music by allowing the interpretation of a notated work in the way the performer deems best or by spontaneously creating a new work in real time by using ideas and techniques previously learned.

It should be recognized that improvisation is not a simple form of music-making given only to certain individuals; rather, it is an art that must be studied and practiced. When learning to speak a language, we master the basic concepts of that language by listening, learning rules of grammar and the meanings of words, and practicing the concepts learned. The same is true when learning to improvise: basics come first and music be practiced. Remember, no one learns to talk overnight.⁶

⁴ Gould, *Essential Role*, 143-147.

⁵ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 1.

⁶ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 1.

History of Improvisation

Improvisation is one of the oldest musical techniques practiced. In some way, improvisation has been a part of most musical styles that have ever existed throughout the world. Ernest Ferand once said that any historical study of music that does not take into account improvisation must present an incomplete and distorted picture of music's history.⁷

The Baroque period was the first period of Western art music to make extensive use of the keyboard. Therefore, the history of improvisation as it relates to the keyboard is best discussed starting with this period. During this time of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, improvisation was very common among keyboardists. Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, J.S. Bach, and Handel, to name a few, were especially known for their organ improvisations.⁸ At the time, the term *improvisation* was not commonly used. Rather, we see certain titles for works that were often improvised or improvisatory in nature: fantasy, ricercare, prelude, etc.⁹ These keyboard masters composed works that frequently originated from an improvisation. Improvisation was, in essence, the "genesis of the music [the composers] refined into written compositions."¹⁰

In the Baroque period, improvisation grew in prominence through the practice of thoroughbass accompaniment (basso continuo).¹¹ For unfigured bass notation, logically, a bass note was written but no figures were given. For the figured bass notation, keyboardists were given a bass note and intervallic symbol. For both types of thoroughbass accompaniment, the remaining notes were improvised. The keyboardist decided the dynamics, texture, contour, emotion, and other musical details during the moment of performance. Though this was only

⁷ Ferand, *Improvisation in Nine Centuries*, 5.

⁸ Randel, *Harvard*, 392.

⁹ Blum, *Recognizing Improvisation*, 36-40.

¹⁰ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, vi.

¹¹ Ferand, *Improvisation in Nine Centuries*, 14.

one style of improvisation, its common use during the Baroque period led most of the great keyboard masters to teach their students how to play thoroughbass accompaniment properly and, therefore, improvisation.¹²

Furthermore, during the eighteenth century, the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart left people in “utter amazement” as he was able to “improvise for hours on end out of his own head.”¹³ Mozart and many of his contemporaries frequently wrote the word “cadenza” in the score signifying that the keyboardist should improvise the cadenza during the moment of performance. Mozart’s improvisations were sometimes as small as simple ornaments added to notated works and other times as large as complete works created live during a performance.¹⁴

Ludwig van Beethoven was also known as a great improviser. His student Carl Czerny painted an excellent picture of how Beethoven impressed society with improvisation:

I still remember how one day Gelinek told my father that he was invited to a party that evening where he was to oppose a foreign virtuoso in a pianistic duel. “I’ll fix him,” Gelinek added. Next day my father asked Gelinek about the outcome of the battle. Gelinek looked quite crestfallen and said: “Yesterday was a day I’ll remember! That young fellow must be in league with the devil. I’ve never heard anybody play like that! I gave him a theme to improvise on, and I assure you I’ve never even heard Mozart improvise so admirably. Then he played some of his own compositions, which are marvelous - really wonderful - and he manages difficulties and effects at the keyboard that we never even dreamed of.” “I say, what’s his name?” asked my father with some astonishment. “He is a small, ugly, swarthy young fellow, and seems to have a willful disposition,” answered Gelinek; “Prince Lichnowsky brought him to Vienna from Germany to let him study composition with Haydn, Albrechtsberger, and Salieri, and his name is Beethoven.”¹⁵

Many of Beethoven’s works were also improvisatory in nature. His opus 27 piano sonatas are both labeled *Quasi una fantasia*. In an interview with Noam Sivan, Robert Levin reveals the irony: while Beethoven preferred to improvise in concert, including cadenzas in his

¹² Ferand, *Improvisation in Nine Centuries*, 18.

¹³ Solomon, *Beethoven*, 23-24.

¹⁴ Poulter, *Teaching Improv*, 79.

¹⁵ Czerny, *Recollections*, 304.

concerti, if someone else were to play his works, he notated exactly what notes should be played and was angered if anyone departed from that notation (even for the cadenza).¹⁶

Carl Czerny was an influential piano pedagogue of the early nineteenth century and a strong advocate of improvisation. Czerny's opus 200 treatise was solely focused on the topic, and he was one of few musicians during his time to create piano treatises that dealt with improvisation.¹⁷ Most of the important treatises for keyboardists were designed for organists.¹⁸

As the nineteenth century progressed, improvisations were still performed by many of the leading pianists of the Romantic period: Brahms, Chopin, Clara and Robert Schumann, Mendelssohn, etc.¹⁹ Czerny often spoke about how he trained Liszt to become an improviser by frequently "giving him themes to improvise on."²⁰

Through programs and various writings we know that improvisation was a large part of live performance among the piano virtuosi of the nineteenth century, and yet Czerny, during the first half of the century, spoke of how technical agility had begun to take precedence over creative "spur-of-the-moment" creation at the piano.²¹ Improvisation among pianists had already begun to fade by the time Czerny wrote his opus 200 treatise. One reason for this decline was the vanishing role of the improvising keyboard accompanist—a role that had been very prominent in the eighteenth century.²²

¹⁶ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 25-26.

¹⁷ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, ix-xii.

¹⁸ See organ treatises by Fray Tomás de Santa Maria, Adriano Banchieri, James Conely, etc.

¹⁹ Moore, *Decline*, 62-63.

²⁰ Czerny, *Recollections*, 316.

²¹ Ferand, *Improvisation in Nine Centuries*, 21.

²² Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, ix.

Much of the role of the accompanist was now left in the hands of the composer rather than the performer. It was now the composer who determined the elements of density, dynamics, tempo, etc. within a given passage. The performer was directed to play only what was notated.²³

It became difficult for performers to maintain the art of improvisation during the Romantic period because of the creation of the classical canon. Performers were now expected not only to perform their own composed works, but also to perform numerous works from previous keyboard masters.²⁴ And since the tradition of playing a solo piano concert from memory was established by both Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann, pianists had to learn even more literature than ever before and play that literature from memory.

In addition, Romantic composers wanted their pieces to be performed exactly as notated with no improvisation (especially in cadenzas). Beethoven had this mindset at times, but Romantic composers took the idea further.²⁵ Chopin and Liszt, though incredible improvisers, wrote out the small notes of their cadenza-like passages. Improvisation began to fade from pianists' regular activities until it had basically disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century.²⁶ If improvisation existed at all for a pianist, it was merely a minute academic exercise.

Around 1900, composers and conductors like Maurice Ravel, Ferruccio Busoni, and Gustav Mahler had become very passionate about remaining faithful to the musical text. Mahler prohibited any ornaments that were not notated. Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda state that though Mahler was not a performing pianist, his condemnation of improvisation helped to extinguish the

²³ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, x.

²⁴ Gould, *Essential Role*, 144.

²⁵ Romero, interview.

²⁶ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 4.

musical world of improvised ornamentations and cause a break with old improvisation traditions.²⁷

Piano improvisation received some revival among pianists in the early twentieth century through the field of jazz. Traditional organists continued to improvise as always, but for pianists, jazz was the main field of music that used improvisation at this time. Jazz pianists often followed music charts that were very similar to Baroque thorough-bass music sheets (in jazz, they are commonly called lead sheets). The jazz pianist occasionally received the melodic notes, but was primarily given a symbol that represented the harmony. The rest was created by the pianist during performance. In the latter half of the twentieth century, early rock 'n' roll pianists improvised (Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, etc.). These rock 'n' roll musicians had to be ready to change elements of their music during live performance in order to put on the most entertaining show for the audience.²⁸

There are a few classical pianists in today's world who currently practice the art of improvisation in performance. Robert Levin is known for improvising cadenzas of Mozart in the spirit of the style. Gabriela Montero follows concerts of standard classical repertoire with an encore of improvisation in various styles on a tune suggested by the audience.

Why is Improvisation Uncommon among Classically Trained Pianists?

Improvisation began to fade from the common practice of a classical pianist during the nineteenth century and was mostly nonexistent among classical pianists by the early part of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that before the mid-1800s European performers displayed

²⁷ Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Mozart*, 214.

²⁸ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 39.

much interest in improvisation, it rarely exists among classically trained musicians today.²⁹ Classical musicians are taught to perform notated works in a specific manner. According to Derek Bailey, this tends to instill the idea that music is not malleable and limits the development of that aspect of creativity. The classical musician knows how to rehearse to prepare for a specific performance, but this can lead to the notion that all music must be practiced in the exact manner in which it will be performed.³⁰

The 2010-2011 handbook of the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) states that all students of undergraduate music schools should learn improvisational skills related to their field and have the opportunity to “continue to develop improvisational skills whether as an aspect of composition, musicianship, or performance studies.”³¹ Most higher education schools of music, however, provide the minimum improvisation training possible in order to meet these qualifications. Academically, improvisation is viewed as something solely belonging to the jazz department.³²

George Lewis, in his article “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” goes on to say that the acceptance or rejection of improvisation, whether in an academic or social context, could be racially motivated. Improvisation is often related to jazz, which was primarily of African and African-American origin.³³

Some pianists simply have no interest in improvisation, but many music teachers who rated their ability to improvise as very low also expressed a great interest in learning the art.³⁴ Other pianists think that a person must be gifted with improvisation skills in order to participate

²⁹ Moore, *Decline*, 61.

³⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 66-67.

³¹ National Association of Schools of Music. “National Association of Schools of Music Handbook 2010-11.” <http://nasm.arts-accredit.org>.

³² Alley, interview.

³³ Lewis, *Improvised Music After 1950*, 117.

³⁴ Ward-Steinman, *Confidence*, 28-29.

in the art.³⁵ But as will be pointed out in chapter 2, while some pianists might have more natural improvisatory abilities than others, anyone can learn to improvise.

Lack of time hinders the learning of improvisation. As begun during the Romantic period, the repertoire requirements a pianist was expected to uphold became very taxing and time consuming. Current classical pianists have even more repertoire to practice. Improvisation must also be practiced (see chapter 2). Finding time to develop and maintain both skills can be difficult.³⁶

Classical pianists trained in universities, conservatories, etc. are very good at playing piano. Some of these pianists may, at times, tend to look down on improvisation as if it were beneath them. Learning the first steps of improvisation involves starting with very basic musical concepts. This can be disadvantageous to a trained classical pianist who is comfortable only practicing difficult music. In addition, the pianist who can play challenging repertoire may be annoyed by the inability to improvise simple tunes (yet!). Humility is required for a classical pianist to learn improvisation (and it will be present, whether voluntarily or involuntarily). Pride has no place in improvisation training.³⁷

I believe a larger issue that prevents the modern classically trained pianist from improvising is rooted in the mind. Self-criticism can be good, but it can also be detrimental to the improvisation-learning process. Classical pianists are surrounded by amazing music from past and present composers. When a classical pianist attempts improvisation, there can be a tendency to immediately compare the improvised music to works of the standard repertoire.

³⁵ Hancock, *Improvising*, vii.

³⁶ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 1.

³⁷ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 31.

Since composers are often viewed as super-human, some pianists might feel that improvisation is too complicated and that they could never produce any good music.³⁸

Learning to improvise involves making mistakes. Strict training and hours spent perfecting a difficult passage within a notated work can cause frustration when a pianist is learning to improvise. One cannot guarantee that an improvisation will be perfect. This can be very uncomfortable and fear-inducing for many classical pianists.³⁹

Improvisation involves allowing the personality of the pianist to be expressed through music. It is exposing. A single bad experience with public improvisation can discourage a classical pianist and, as result, cause the pianist never again to attempt improvisation. With proper teaching and encouragement from an instructor, these self-judgmental attitudes can be avoided.

Most classically trained pianists rarely improvise because their teachers do not teach or encourage the art. In his biography of Beethoven, Maynard Solomon states that even in the mid-eighteenth century, when Beethoven was a young pianist, his father discouraged his improvising: “More of your fooling around? Go away, or I’ll box your ears.”⁴⁰

While in today’s world, I do not believe classical pianists will have their ears boxed by their teachers, I do think improvisation is not encouraged enough in the studio or classroom. This is not surprising considering that classical pianists rarely have to improvise to enter a higher education music school or participate in a piano competition.

Many piano teachers in higher education settings do not feel comfortable improvising and, logically, do not attempt to teach improvisation to their students. Unfortunately, this produces an increasing number of classical pianists who never experience the art of

³⁸ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Solomon, *Beethoven*, 23-24.

improvisation.⁴¹ If piano teachers understand the basics of improvisation and encourage their students to improvise, there are greater chances that the classical piano students will feel comfortable attempting improvisation.⁴² Methods to help teachers teach improvisation to their classical piano students will be addressed within chapters 2 and 3 below.

Benefits of Improvisation

Classical pianists who study, teach, and perform solely classical music can have a successful and fulfilling career. I believe, however, that those who rarely improvise lose a valuable tool of musicianship. There are very many benefits to learning the art of improvisation as a trained classical pianist. Today's musical world contains more diverse styles and playing opportunities than ever before. As result, there is great value in knowing how to improvise and take part in this diversity.

Previous Keyboard Masters Improvised

As discussed earlier in this chapter, improvisation was a musical concept practiced and utilized by most keyboard masters of the past. Carl Czerny said that pianists, more than other instrumentalists, should know how to improvise:

Although this capability can be practiced on diverse instruments up to a certain degree, yet the pianoforte remains the only one, by virtue of its completeness and versatility, on which it can best be elevated to an independent branch of art founded on certain basic rules; and the attainment of this art is thus a special obligation and crown of distinction for the keyboard virtuoso.⁴³

⁴¹ Ward-Steinman, *Confidence*, 26.

⁴² Harding, interview.

⁴³ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 1.

Theory and Repertoire Performance

Improvisers are often good music theorists.⁴⁴ This is not to say that performers who primarily play from notated music are bad theorists. I am simply stating that improvisers are required to understand how theory operates in order to create music, while performers of notated works can, technically, play their repertoire without understanding the theory behind the work.

Having the set of keys on the piano allows pianists to better visualize different parts of music theory (multiple voices, chords, scales, etc.). Therefore, pianists have a great advantage among music majors: they can see music theory in action. In addition, since improvisers must understand how theory works in order to improvise music, classical pianists who improvise are able to easily produce a music theory analysis of their classical repertoire.

Many students fail to understand the necessity of learning music theory. Yet, in music theory courses, the students learn how music is constructed. In learning to improvise, the student is able to utilize those classroom concepts when improvising new music (melody, harmony, modulation, form, cadences, etc.).⁴⁵

Learning improvisation can help students feel more comfortable with quick application of music theory concepts and analysis. These students will be able to better understand and learn their classical works which, in turn, will help relieve the students of many fears of performance as they will be more equipped to recover from a mistake.⁴⁶ Gustavo Romero said that pianists who do not fully understand their repertoire tend to be more nervous than those who understand the theory that constructs the work.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Hinz, *Helping Students*, 32.

⁴⁵ Solis, *Musical Improvisation*, 133-34.

⁴⁶ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 8-9.

⁴⁷ Romero, interview.

Overall, memory slips will lessen as students better understand the theory of the repertoire. Instead of relying on muscle memory, they can remember specific chords, key areas, sequences, etc. The students will have more musical information to keep the brain active during performance which, as result, will help them create a smooth performance with fewer mistakes.

Composition

Many great works of the past have either been created from or resemble an improvisation. Compositional thinking is developed through improvisation.⁴⁸ C.P.E. Bach even said that it was fully possible for a musician to compose music without having much improvisation experience, but a “good future in composition can be assuredly predicted for anyone who can improvise.”⁴⁹

Pianists who learn to improvise will also have the basic understanding they need to approach and perform various styles of music. Not only will they be more readily equipped to approach notated works of different styles, but they will be able to improvise and compose in these styles. Trained improvisers can easily analyze the basic theory of a work and, therefore, can quickly learn how music of a certain style is composed. Studying a musical style is like learning a language: if we learn the language solely through exercise without ever speaking it, we cannot properly convey our thoughts through the language or communicate with others. Improvising in a particular style allows the improviser to truly experience the musical language of that style.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 5-7.

⁴⁹ Bach, *Essay*, 430.

⁵⁰ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 38.

Listening

A small, but valuable, benefit of learning to improvise is that the listening ability of the musician is enhanced. Improvisation requires listening. As will be discussed in chapter 3, in the study of improvisation, the musician learns not only to hear how sounds relate to each other, but also to pre-hear sounds before they are made on the instrument. The aural memory that comes with the ability to improvise can be utilized during performance of repertoire as another aspect of memory.⁵¹

Creativity, Personality, and the Audience

Improvising can provide a fun and relaxing experience. Improvisation's "entertaining side reminds us that we 'play' music in the full sense of the word, with joy and pleasure."⁵²

Practicing notated music takes great effort. Improvisation can provide a way to relax while still growing as a musician.

Within improvisation, the musician has total freedom. Musical boundaries can be created or ignored (i.e., the musician is allowed to play whatever he/she desires). Improvisation helps us remember the importance of freedom in the "spirit of performance" that we, as musicians, need to have.⁵³

The personality of the musician is often displayed through improvised music. Every musician has creative ideas and imagination. Improvisation allows this creativity to be released. It stimulates imagination. Many students may at first be hesitant or even fearful of allowing their creativity to shine through their improvisations. They may believe that they lack the ability to be creative. But, everyone has a unique musical story to tell. Encourage students to not give up

⁵¹ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 8-9.

⁵² Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 5-7.

⁵³ Romero, interview.

until they see what is hidden within their musical imagination.⁵⁴ Noam Sivan goes as far as saying that teaching classical musicians to improvise is important because improvisation “stimulates their imagination and encourages creative, compositional thinking—qualities that are vital to performance.”⁵⁵

From an audience’s perspective, hearing an improvisation allows them to see a glimpse of the performer’s personality. In addition, there is an element of surprise. The audience does not know what to expect during a live improvisation, but there is a sense of freedom and ease in the connection of ideas.⁵⁶

Live improvisation requires intentional listening by the audience. As Noam Sivan states, since live improvisation is created in real-time on stage, it can help free classical music from its “general-public image of being too conservative and museum-like,” which can increase improvisation’s popularity without sacrificing the standards of musical art.⁵⁷

Social Situations

One of the largest benefits of learning to improvise as a classically trained pianist is that it allows the pianist to better participate in social music situations. Too often, classical pianists freeze when approached with an opportunity to play a tune that has not been memorized and for which they have no sheet music. Consider the following scenario:

John is a senior within the music school of his university and is earning a bachelor’s degree in piano performance. At Christmas time, John goes to a party with his friends. Knowing that John is an outstanding pianist (because they have heard him perform recitals), John’s friends ask him to sit down and play some standard Christmas carols at the piano. There is no sheet music and John does not have any carols memorized. As a result, he quietly shies away

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Improvised Music After 1950*, 117.

⁵⁵ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, abstract.

⁵⁶ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 2.

⁵⁷ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 7.

from the piano and attempts to change the subject in order to avoid the situation. Meanwhile, another friend—with no musical training—sits down at the piano and begins to roughly play through Christmas carols by ear.

As trained classical pianists, the above scenario could easily be avoided. If John had learned to apply the basics of theory through learning to improvise, he could have played simple Christmas tunes. In private lessons we learn to read, listen to, and appreciate music but rarely are we taught what to do in a scenario as described above.⁵⁸

Learning the basics of improvisation can help prepare a classically trained pianist to play music for various events including parties, receptions, jazz gigs, weddings, and other such social gatherings. Certainly, a pianist might be able to use notated music for some of those events, but improvisation helps the pianist create a smoother flow of music (i.e. transitions between tunes). An improvising pianist has the ability to participate in these events with little preparation time.

In today's music world, improvisation is becoming more common. Teachers must be ready to help students who have the desire to improvise. No teacher should attempt to teach improvisation without understanding and experiencing the art. Therefore, all classical piano teachers should aim to learn the basics of improvisation for, if nothing else, the sake of their students. Too many classical pianists regret having never taken the time to pursue improvisation. This regret can be avoided if classical piano teachers learn to improvise and teach their students to do the same.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 19.

⁵⁹ True, interview.

CHAPTER 2: BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In order to properly teach improvisation techniques to a classical pianist in a higher education music program, the teacher must understand those techniques. I recommend that anyone who wishes to teach improvisation should first feel comfortable with basic improvisation concepts. While the improvisation methods discussed below are designed for instruction of students, they may also be used to reinforce the skills and increase the comfort level of the instructor.

Some teachers ask the question, “Can improvisation be taught?” Many pianists tend to think that the art of improvisation is a skill given only to some pianists. Treatises from keyboard pedagogues of the past tell otherwise. Carl Czerny admitted that some pianists could improvise better than others, but also that, as long as one is willing to invest time in practicing improvisation, “any body [*sic*], who has attained to more than a moderate skill in playing, is also capable, at least to a certain degree, of acquiring the art of playing extemporaneously.”⁶⁰ Czerny’s opus 200 treatise focuses solely on learning improvisation, and many modern music teachers (pianists and non-pianists) fully agree that improvisation is an art that can be taught.⁶¹

Pedagogical Principles

Before a teacher begins to help a student learn to improvise, there are some basic principles that will be useful to remember. Improvisation can be taught in a variety of ways, and no one way is best. The main principle to remember is that each student learns improvisation

⁶⁰ Czerny, *Letters*, 78-79.

⁶¹ See names of those interviewed in the Works Cited and Works Consulted pages near the end of this document.

in a different way. Though the methods listed throughout this paper are in a certain order, it is best that the teacher alter that order according to what would work best for the particular student. If the student is most comfortable with rhythm, begin with rhythmic embellishments. If the student has grown up playing by ear, start with ear-training exercises. Be as student-specific as possible. Do not be afraid to let the student's imagination direct the improvisations.

The piano teacher should start with an area and style in which the student feels most comfortable. The style can range from classical and jazz to rock and pop. If the student has no particular music style of interest, use some of the student's current repertoire as stylistic example. Allow the student's personality and pianistic abilities to join with the improvisation lesson. Use what the student knows and build upon that knowledge. Provide exercises and challenges that flow with the student's area of interest. Each student is unique and cannot be taught in an identical manner as another.

To help with the above suggestion, teachers should conduct a pre-improvisation lesson analysis of the student. Think through the student's strengths and weaknesses in connection with notated music. How comfortable is the student with theory principles? Does the student have good performing technique? Is the student comfortable with aural skills?⁶²

As will be revealed throughout this paper, for any improvisation exercise, always start simply. This allows the mind to understand and take part in the improvisation process. Do not allow the speed of the fingers to go faster than the thought process of the brain. For some advanced piano students in higher education programs, a simple start will present a challenge as some may be embarrassed with this humble approach. Simplistic initiation, however, allows the brain to properly learn the ways of improvisation. Remember, crawling comes before walking.⁶³

⁶² Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 27-28.

⁶³ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 5.

Confidence

Improvisation contains a large element of personal expression. The improviser's ideas and emotions are put on display for the audience. It involves risk. These facts alone can make many pianists very self-conscious about their improvising. Fear drives many from ever attempting to improvise.

Therefore, when a student is first learning to improvise, it is vital that his/her confidence be boosted. Building up and developing the student's confidence increases the chances that the student will continue using improvisation in the future.⁶⁴ Throughout the entire learning process the teacher should be very cautious of negative feedback. Positive feedback is essential, especially if other students are nearby. Whether in a private lesson or a classroom full of students, aim to create an atmosphere that is fun and relaxing. If the teacher is having a group lesson (such as in a studio class), agree to some ground-rules among the students: no laughing, no grimacing, no talking behind another's back, and only positive or helpful feedback.⁶⁵

A teacher might remind the students that within improvisation there are no wrong notes, just notes that might work better than others. Musical accidents will happen, but a better sounding note is rarely more than a half-step away.⁶⁶ If a note sounds wrong, make use of it. Resolve a foreign note or work it into a dense chord. If a rhythm is disrupted, continue the disrupted pattern sequentially.⁶⁷

The process of creating new music instantly can often overwhelm a student. During the beginning learning stages, it is vital to set improvisational boundaries (rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, registral, etc.). Most improvisations contain boundaries of some type which, as result,

⁶⁴ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 28.

⁶⁵ Riveire, *Using Improvisation*, 43-44.

⁶⁶ Hancock, *Improvising*, vii-x.

⁶⁷ Hakim, *Principles*, 3.

help prevent the improviser from feeling burdened with too many options. It might also help to remind the student that “improvisation is not necessarily the process of creating something completely new. More often, it is a process of taking familiar patterns or phrases and applying them creatively to new situations.”⁶⁸

Finally, the teacher should rarely improvise for a student. Doing so might intimidate the student and cause a greater self-conscious analysis of his/her own playing. This risks driving the student away from the art. Improvising for the student is more acceptable once the student feels comfortable improvising on his/her own.

The student must be patient and take things one step at a time. It will be awkward at times and it might sound strange at times. Help the student remember that this is a learning process and that, just like the learning of notated classical works, the ability to play a well-polished and entertaining work is not created overnight.

Creativity and Personal Expression

To a large extent, improvisation involves personal expression. Ideas from within the improviser are displayed through his/her music. This can be heard in the improvisatory moments of notated music performance (fermatas, rubato, tempo and dynamic decision, etc.), as well as in spontaneous creation of a new musical work. This is the moment in music that the performer’s heart and brain cooperate to the fullest extent.⁶⁹

As an improvisation teacher, allowing the student to be creative in his/her improvisations is extremely important in molding the student into a good improviser. Christopher Harding

⁶⁸ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 25.

⁶⁹ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 8.

believes that musical creativity is not taught or encouraged in traditional music lessons.⁷⁰ A teacher cannot force a student to be creative but the teacher can encourage and allow the student to express personal ideas in music.

The teacher can have the student take an easy and familiar melody, and then create a new version of that melody. The student can play it in whatever style is desired and change any details of the music (dynamics, rhythm, tempo, etc.). Remember, being creative does not exclude one from using specific styles of music nor does it require that the improviser feel comfortable with every style of music (we would not expect to hear Thelonious Monk playing Motown hits in a wedding band nor Bob Dylan singing in the opera).⁷¹ Being musically creative is simply allowing the ideas and desires from within oneself to be revealed through the improvisations.

When improvising a tune, creative expression or inspiration may not be as accommodating as one might desire. If the student experiences a musical roadblock, encourage the student to set up boundaries and use previous ideas (self-created or from others). The boundaries might involve a certain harmonic scheme or phrase length, while previous ideas could include rhythmic motives or short melodies. Often, once the student begins playing within the specified boundaries, new ideas will come to mind.⁷²

Practice

A common misconception about improvisation is that it cannot be practiced and that it is something “without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity,

⁷⁰ Harding, interview.

⁷¹ Blake, *Primacy*, 3.

⁷² Whitmer, *The Art*, 36.

frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method.”⁷³ Certainly, if someone practices the same notes of an improvisation multiple times it is no longer considered improvising but simply practicing repertoire. With improvisation, however, one must practice the process of allowing creativity and ideas to flow through oneself at the moment of musical creation.

Many musicians in today’s music world do not improvise because they do not have time to do so. Zachary Poulter states that “while the *inclination* to improvise is universal, the *ability* to improvise musically must be attained through ‘rehearsal.’”⁷⁴ The improviser must practice making the split-second decisions required during an improvisation. As the student practices, the process of improvisation will become easier.

When teaching a student to improvise, assign improvisation homework. Have the student improvise within a specified framework (depending on the comfort level of the student) and try a new improvisation within that framework each day. Even if a student seems to have a natural improvisation skill, if it is not developed, that skill will become stagnant because the musician is not learning how to expand his/her improvisational abilities.

When the student feels comfortable, have him/her practice with another improvisation student. This allows them to practice their improvisational thinking while experiencing the pressure of live performance (which, therefore, allows them to practice being creative while nervous). When the student feels ready, let him/her improvise for the studio class.⁷⁵

The concluding statement within one of Carl Czerny’s many writings on improvisation expresses well an idea all improvisation students should remember: “Therefore...exercise

⁷³ Bailey, *Improvisation*, xii.

⁷⁴ Poulter, *Teaching Improv*, 6.

⁷⁵ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 29.

yourself cheerfully and courageously in this very honorable branch of the art. If the labour is great, the pleasure and reward which you may gain thereby are still greater.”⁷⁶

Children and Improvisation:

Most people who play piano started taking piano lessons as a child. It is only logical, then, that a certain element of improvisation instruction should appear within lessons for children. The focus of this document, however, is towards pianists of the college level. While I do believe that many of the ideas in the following pages can be adapted for teaching improvisation to children, I will not discuss improvisation teaching techniques that are specifically directed towards children. For a list of sources through which you can begin discovering ideas for teaching improvisation to children see Appendix II.

⁷⁶ Czerny, *Letters*, 82.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS FOR TEACHING IMPROVISATION TO CLASSICAL PIANISTS

The methods and exercises listed below should be adapted for each improvisation student according to the student's strengths and weaknesses. Since each student will progress at a different pace, avoid setting the same goals and boundaries for each improvisation student in the studio. There is no scientific order that must be followed to produce a successful improviser. The main thing to remember is this: start simply and progress gradually. Students can learn and discover much of the improvisation world on their own. As teachers, we simply help begin that process by providing ideas and opportunities for improvisation.

Embellishment

Embellishment serves as an excellent starting point for the improvisation beginner. This will allow the student to take a short and simple musical idea and alter or expand it slightly. There are two main forms of embellishment that work well for the beginner: rhythmic and melodic.

Rhythmic embellishment involves having the student embellish a very simple rhythm. I suggest using an unpitched percussion instrument that is easy to play (bongos, congas, woodblocks, etc.). An advanced piano player will feel less intimidated when using one of these percussion instruments. Since the student is not a trained percussionist, less embarrassment will be felt if mistakes occur. If no percussion instruments can be obtained, the student could clap or

use every day items found around the studio (pencil, notebook, etc.). It would be best to avoid using the piano at first.

To begin, create a basic one-bar rhythm (it is usually best to create the bar with four quarter notes present). Play the rhythm at the same time as the student, repeating the bar until ready to move forward. It may work well to turn on a metronome for this exercise. As the teacher continues to provide the original rhythmic motive (here, four quarter notes), have the student alter one part of the rhythm. The student could divide a quarter note into two eighths or insert many eighth notes and eighth rests (see figure 3-1). Make sure the student, not the teacher, creates the rhythmic alteration.

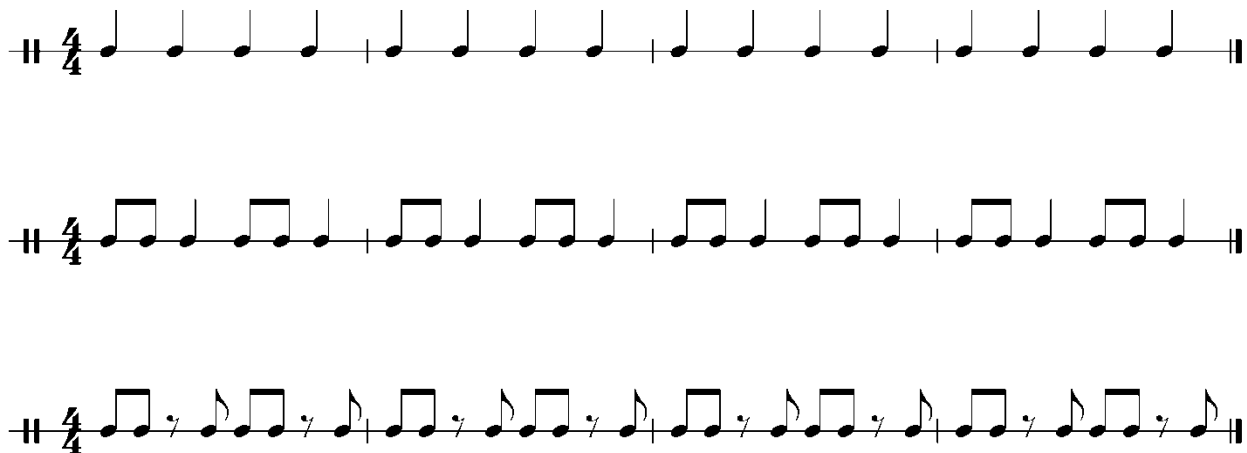


FIGURE 3-1. SIMPLE RHYTHMIC EMBELLISHMENT

As you continue this process, encourage the student to progressively make the rhythm more complicated. Have the student combine rhythmic patterns, even though doing so is risky.⁷⁷ Do not rush this process. Only move forward when the student feels ready. When the student can improvise new rhythms fairly comfortably, bring in audio recordings and have the student rhythmically improvise on top of the recording. The recording should be upbeat, but can align with the stylistic interests of the student (hip-hop, jazz, and rock music tend to work the best).

⁷⁷ Conely, *A Guide*, 9.

Assign the student to practice embellishing rhythms on his/her own in between lessons. Comfort in rhythmic embellishments may take multiple weeks or it may come in a day. But, when the student seems comfortable with rhythmic embellishments, it is time to add in actual notes.

Melodic embellishment can be harder than rhythmic because there are more concepts about which one must think. One of the best ways to start melodic embellishment is to take a scale (any one the student can comfortably play) and alter it rhythmically.⁷⁸ Limit the student to one octave and have him/her play the scale ascending and descending while altering the rhythm. Be sure to have the student improviser play within a certain meter and create specific rhythmic patterns that will allow the scale to end on the tonic note. Expand this idea as the student feels comfortable (new rhythms, greater registral range, etc.). Be sure the student practices these exercises with the right and left hand (primarily one at a time, but occasionally the hands can be played simultaneously).

Have the student then play a familiar, and easy, tune (such as *Mary Had a Little Lamb*). Use the melody but do not include the harmony. Then have the student alter the tune rhythmically in a variety of ways. Allow the student to pick a comfortable key, but encourage the student to practice these exercises in several different keys (key familiarity is of great benefit to an improviser).⁷⁹

The next step involves true embellishment of the melody. Have the student add notes to a pre-existing melody (preferably the one used in the previous exercise). Diatonic neighbor and passing notes serve as the best tools for this exercise. Advanced piano students studying in higher education will learn about these notes in their beginning theory courses. Below is an example of this process using the tune *Mary Had a Little Lamb*:

⁷⁸ If this seems too hard for the student, have him/her create rhythms using one or two notes on the piano. Encourage the student to see how creatively he/she can play those notes.

⁷⁹ Again, each idea listed here also serves as an excellent assignment for the student to work on in the practice room.

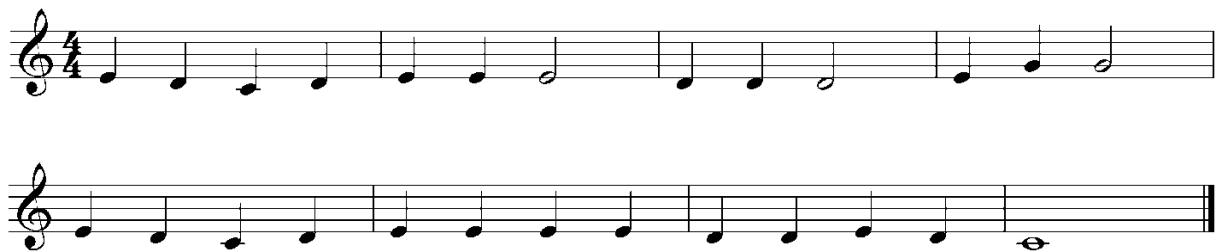


FIGURE 3-2. ORIGINAL TUNE

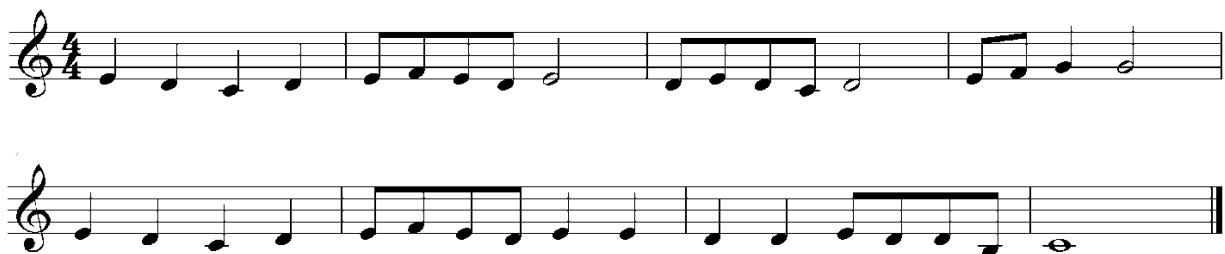


FIGURE 3-3. SIMPLE MELODIC EMBELLISHMENTS



FIGURE 3-4. ADDITIONAL (ADVANCED) EMBELLISHMENTS. STARS (*) REPRESENT ORIGINAL MELODY NOTES

If possible, initially have multiple students attempt the melodic embellishment simultaneously as this helps to eliminate hesitation or fear.⁸⁰ The piano teacher can do this by finding a room with multiple pianos or by having students play in different registers on the same piano.

David Baker suggests that the improvising student attempt to alter the key of a simple melody while keeping the same first and last notes. This helps the student learn the sounds of

⁸⁰ Noffsinger, interview.

various note-patterns. Baker uses *Joy to the World* as an example since the melody uses a simple descending and ascending scalar pattern. The student can put the piece in minor or change the key signature (see figure 3-5).

Original:



Harmonic Minor:



Key Changes:

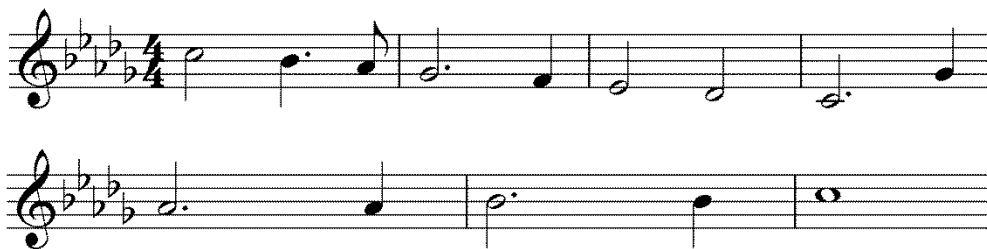


FIGURE 3-5. MELODIC EMBELLISHMENTS⁸¹

Baker also recommends having the student play the inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion of the tune and then combine it with the original melody.⁸² Allow the student to experiment with altering the dynamics, tempo, and melodic shape of the tune. If the student enjoys the concept of embellishments and is progressing well, encourage him/her to add basic

⁸¹ Baker, *A Tool for Music Learning*, 42-47.

⁸² *Ibid.*

ornamentation to other simple notated works (J.S. Bach's *Notebook for Anna Magdalena* is an excellent source to use).

As the teacher, do not feel limited by the exercises mentioned in this document. Since each student is unique, develop exercises that would best fit that student's interest. An excellent resource that all piano improvisation teachers should own is *Improvisation at the Piano* by Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond (see bibliography for further information). The book contains many exercise ideas that teachers can use directly or use as example for creating their own student-exercises.

Simple Melodic Improvisation

Once the student has experienced improvisation through work with rhythmic and melodic embellishment, it is time for the student to attempt simple improvisatory creation of a melody. Tony Wigram suggests starting the student with strict limitations: "A common mistake is the novice improver's assumption that the more notes used...the more exciting and creative will be the improvisation. Actually, this often leads in another direction—into the land of chaos and over-production."⁸³

Wigram recommends challenging the student to try to be creative with a single note. Let the student pick the note. There are many characteristics the student can alter to bring variety to that one note: dynamics, timbre, accent, sustain, duration/rhythm, touch, frequency of repetition, etc. For every idea, have the student listen closely to the produced effect as this will begin building up a musical-idea bank within the student's mind.⁸⁴ Once finished, have the student pick a second note and play the new two-note melody while altering the characteristics listed

⁸³ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 45.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

above. For two-note improvisations, encourage the student to use intervals of fourths, fifths, sixths, etc. (avoid small intervals of seconds and thirds). Even dissonant intervals work well.

When the student seems ready (whether after an hour or after a week), have him/her pick out three or four notes from within a certain key of the student's choosing. These are the notes to be used in the new melody. Enlist the same ideas as above with these new notes. It might help to have the right hand play the three- or four-note melody in one register while the left hand plays it in a lower register. Have the student try to create a conversation between the two hands using the selected notes.⁸⁵

Sequences are excellent tools to help bring variety to an improvisation (and can provide the mind with a moment to think of what to do next). The student can choose a three- or four-note pattern and use sequences to improvise a theme. Measure one could involve the created note pattern sequentially ascending (all diatonically) while measure two could have it sequentially descending (or vice versa). If the student feels comfortable with various keys, have him/her attempt the first measure sequence in a major key and the second measure sequence in the relative minor.⁸⁶ Some students may feel discouraged only playing and embellishing melodies with three or four notes. It might be helpful to remind those students of works such as Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* (movement 1) that are entirely based on a very short motive.

When the student is comfortable creating three- and four-note melodies, allow the note amount to expand slightly. A call and response-style exercise can help the student learn to improvise short melodies.⁸⁷ Decide on a key in which the student feels comfortable playing.

⁸⁵ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 57-63.

⁸⁶ Whitmer, *The Art*, 3-5.

⁸⁷ Call and response games between teacher and student can be used to help the student practice most of the concepts described in this document.

Have the student play the scale to get the sound of the key in the mind's ear. The teacher should then play a one- or two-bar antecedent phrase that begins on the tonic (and, at first, should end on the dominant). The student then plays a one- or two-bar consequent phrase that ends on the tonic.⁸⁸ On occasion, reverse roles and allow the student to create the antecedent phrase. Throughout this exercise, encourage variety in dynamics, rhythm, melodic shape, etc. See to it, however, that improvising the notes and understanding the musical phrase takes priority over all other details.

As the student grows in comfort with this style of melodic improvisation, expand the boundaries even farther. Expanding to an eight-bar phrase presents a wonderful challenge. Call and response games work well for beginning and advanced students as they allow the teacher and student to alter the difficulty level as needed.⁸⁹ For homework, give the student some antecedent and consequent phrases, and assign the student to improvise the other phrase (antecedent or consequent). I recommend that the teacher compose some of the assigned musical phrases. However, I believe it is also good to use composed melodies of past composers in order to better challenge the student to match the style of the given phrase when improvising the response.⁹⁰ For this last suggestion, it might be better to find pre-composed melodies the student does not know. If a student was given the first eight measures of J.S. Bach's familiar *Minuet in G Major*, any consequent phrase the student improvised would not sound like the original phrase. This could cause an unconfident student to compare his/her improvisations to the music of Bach which might, in turn, tremendously discourage the student.

The teacher can challenge a confident improvisation student by taking a familiar piece of notated music, erasing certain measures, and having the student improvise those blank measures

⁸⁸ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 41.

⁸⁹ Dolan, *Back to the Future*, 118-121.

⁹⁰ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 55.

when he/she comes to that point of the piece. Johann Kirnberger suggested using a similar concept as the basis for composition.⁹¹

Chords

Harmony has served as the foundation for most music throughout history. One of the best ways a pianist can learn to improvise harmony is through learning to use chords. It is vital that the piano improvisation student feel comfortable with every major and minor scale (thus knowing the proper notes belonging to every key). If the student is not comfortable with all keys, he/she can continue improvisation studies, but should strive to achieve all-key proficiency as soon as possible.

As with all aspects of improvisation training, start with simple concepts and gradually increase in difficulty as the student is ready. For chords, the best place to start is with the major triad. The majority of piano students within higher education music programs will already have an understanding of chords (as should their teachers). Therefore, I will not spend time discussing the basics of chords.⁹² In addition, this document will not discuss simultaneities that have set-theory as the basis for their creation.

Basic Chords

The improvising student should have a firm understanding of major and minor triads as well as all types of seventh chords. Encourage the student to take a single chord (triad or seventh

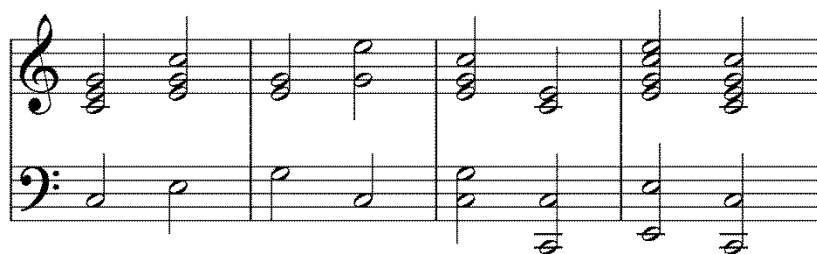
⁹¹ Kirnberger's *Method for Tossing Off Sonatas* involves, first, taking a familiar work and only keeping the bass line. Then compose a new melody for that bass line. Next, compose a new bass line for the newly composed melody. The opposite approach works just as well. The original work is, therefore, used as a structural form to help create the new piece. The improviser can improvise new parts over a previously composed bass line or melody. For more information on this compositional approach, including Kirnberger's original article, see William S. Newman's "Kirnberger's 'Method for Tossing Off Sonatas.'" *The Musical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Oct. 1961): 517-525.

⁹² A teacher who does not feel comfortable discussing chords with a student may wish to glance back through an undergraduate theory textbook in order to best grasp these ideas.

chord) and play it in a variety of inversions at the keyboard. The chord may be in closed or open position. The student can use both hands and may repeat notes. The student must always play all the notes belonging to the chord, but the arrangement or amount of notes repeated does not matter (see figure 3-6). Have the student practice inversions with a single chord for at least three minutes during a lesson (this can also serve as a homework exercise). It is good for the student to try this exercise with both easy and hard chords.

When the student progresses far enough to feel comfortable with triad and seventh chord inversions, attempting similar inversion exercises with ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords is recommended.

C major triad



G minor seven (minor-minor seventh)

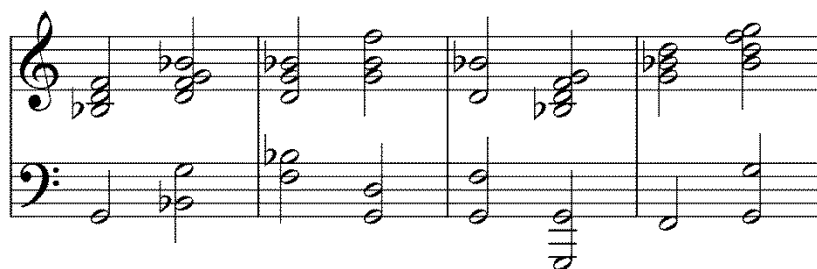


FIGURE 3-6. VARIETIES OF THE SAME CHORD

Have the student practice identifying chords used in the repertoire he/she is currently playing. Though these chords may be broken apart (and will, most often, involve additional passing tones, neighbor notes, etc.), this is an excellent way for the student to better learn what

notes belong to certain chords.⁹³ A student's memory of his/her repertoire will become more secure as the student is able to quickly conduct a chordal analysis of the music. To help with this process, challenge the student to take a simple classical work and change its mode (primarily from major to minor or minor to major, see figure 3-7).⁹⁴

Original: G major

The first system of the musical score shows measures 1 through 4 in G major. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line starting on G4, moving up stepwise to B4, then down to G4, and finally to E4. The bass clef staff contains a bass line starting on G2, moving up stepwise to B2, then down to G2, and finally to E2. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

First phrase now in G minor:

The second system of the musical score shows measures 1 through 4 in G minor. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line starting on G4, moving up stepwise to B4, then down to G4, and finally to E4. The bass clef staff contains a bass line starting on G2, moving up stepwise to B2, then down to G2, and finally to E2. The key signature has two flats (F and Cb) and the time signature is 3/4.

FIGURE 3-7. J.S. BACH'S *MINUET IN G*, MM. 1-8 (MAJOR AND MINOR)

⁹³ Sarath, *Music Theory*, 93.

⁹⁴ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 27-31.

Chord Progressions

By “chord progressions” I am referring to a series of chords that are placed in succession. It is vital that the improvising pianist feel comfortable moving easily from one chord to the next. This will be applicable in every style of improvised music (Baroque, jazz, mainstream, etc.).

In every major and minor key, seven basic triads can be built from the scale corresponding to the specified key (figure 3-8).

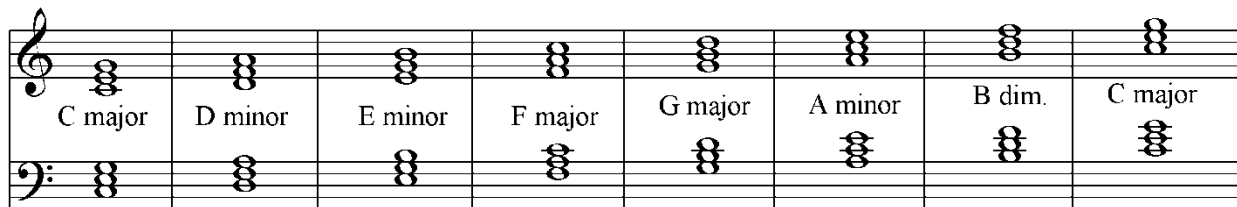


FIGURE 3-8. BASIC TRIADS OF THE KEY OF C MAJOR

First, have the improvising student get comfortable playing every triad of the specified key in a variety of inversions. Then, create a short chord progression. For the purpose of playing modern music and transposing music (both discussed below), it is important that the teacher display a chord progression using both letters and Roman numerals at alternate times:⁹⁵

C | F | a | d G | C OR I | IV | vi | ii V | I

It often works best to have the student start by playing the progression solely with root position triads. Once the student feels comfortable playing the progression in root position, have him/her use inversions in order to move as little as possible when going from one chord to the next (figure 3-9):

⁹⁵ Lower case letters often designate minor triads. At times they will be written as follows: A minor, Am, Amin.

Root position

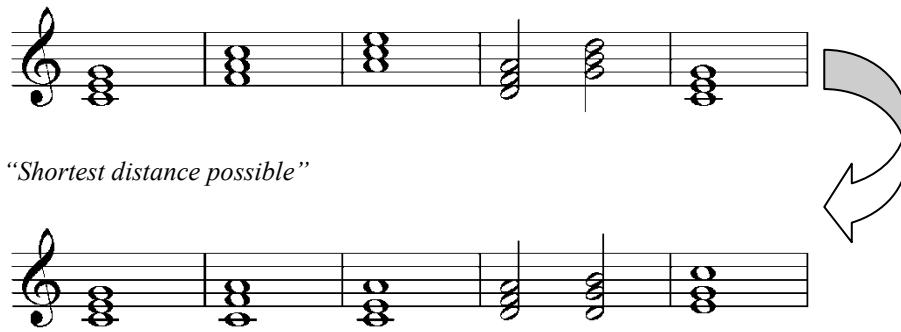


FIGURE 3-9. CHORD PROGRESSION

The student should practice these chord progressions until he/she can easily move from chord to chord.⁹⁶ When the student sees that a C major triad should be played, all of the Cs, Es, and Gs should stand out on the keyboard (as if highlighted) since those are the possible notes the improviser can use at that point. When the student feels comfortable completing the above tasks with major and minor triads, have him/her attempt the same exercises with seventh chords.⁹⁷

To help an advancing student gain more confidence in improvising chord progressions, have the student play two chords of any type (major, minor, triad, seventh, etc.). The second chord should have at least one tone in common with the first chord, but does not have to be diatonic. Have the student continue this process until he/she can do so at ease.

Some students enjoy having goals in the exercise just mentioned. For example, if the student begins with a C major triad, the goal might be to find a chordal path to an F-sharp major triad using common tone chords. Then, the student can attempt to find a different path back to the original key of C major. This exercise will help the student better learn to improvise chord progressions and allow him/her to hear how certain chords interact when played consecutively.

⁹⁶ Ed Sarath provides many practice progressions on p. 121 of his *Music Theory through Improvisation* book.

⁹⁷ Seventh chord clarity (often seen outside of traditional music schools):
G7 = dominant seven (G-B-D-F)
GM7 = major-major seven (G-B-D-F#)
Gmin7 = minor-minor seven (G-Bb-D-F)

Chord Charts

I will now discuss adding melody to the harmonic foundation that has been created. Before having the student attempt to improvise a melody with accompanying chords, have the student sing a familiar melody over a chord progression he/she plays on the piano. The piano accompaniment should be blocked chords (i.e., all the notes should be played at once, not broken apart). I recommend that the student start this exercise by using the chords of a traditional hymn or folk tune. In today's technological world, a simple chord chart can be located for free on the internet and will look similar to the following chord chart of the hymn *Amazing Grace*:

```
C           F       C
Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
C           G
That saved a wretch like me.
C           F       C
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
C           G7   C
Was blind, but now I see.
```

Notice that there are no rhythmic notations, no tempo markings, and no measures. A chord chart comes with the assumption that the improviser using the chart will already know the melody and song structure. The improvising student should take a chord chart and play through the chord progression. Then, the student should attempt to sing the melody on top of the accompanying chords. If a student is self-conscious about singing, let him/her practice this alone at home or in a practice room. After singing, have the student play the chord progression in the left hand while the right hand plays the melody previously sung.

Melody and Harmony

A simple melody often changes chords once per measure. The improvising student, however, should attempt to play a new major or minor triad with each melodic note. The triad must contain the melody's note (i.e., ensure that the melody will not clash with the harmony). Sarath provides an excellent example of this process by taking the "Ode to Joy" theme from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* (movement IV) and providing two results: one chord per measure and one chord per note (figure 3-10).⁹⁸

Harmonization 1: D A⁷ D A⁷

Harmonization 2: D Bmin Emin/G F#min Bmin⁷ Emin D/F# Emin/G Bmin G Emin D Bmin Emin⁷ A⁷

5 D Bmin Emin/G F#min Bmin⁷ Emin D/F# Emin/G Bmin G F#min Bmin Emin A⁷ D

FIGURE 3-10. HARMONIC VARIETY⁹⁹

For homework, have the student find a simple melody (from a piece of music or one the student creates) and choose one or two progressions of chords that could accompany that melody. Then have the student play the melody in the right hand, while the left hand plays the chords. It is acceptable, though more complicated, for the student to play the melody with the upper fingers of the right hand (3, 4, and 5) while the remaining right hand fingers help the left hand create the chord.

As the student grows comfortable playing chord progressions, it is time for him/her to attempt improvising melodies on top of a chord progression. Wigram recommends starting this

⁹⁸ Sarath, *Music Theory*, 155.

⁹⁹ A chord containing a slash is a non-traditional signifier of an inversion. D/F#, for example, is a D major triad with F# in the bass (a first inversion D major triad).

practice by playing a single chord in the left hand while the right hand improvises a melody.

Have the student practice this in recitative style so that pulse is not an issue.¹⁰⁰ This is simply a time for the student to discover how melodic sounds interact with the accompanying harmony.

To further challenge the student, have him/her create and play a simple chord progression in any key. Then have the student sing a simple phrase or melody while playing the created chord progression. This will not be easy, especially at the beginning. Once the student has successfully played a chord progression while singing a melody, have the student use the right hand to play the previously sung melody while the left hand continues the same chord progression. Bob Hinz explains how playing a short chord progression while singing an improvised melody “develops in students the ability to coordinate the improvised melody with the harmony established in the chord progression, and playing on their instrument what they sang in the [singing] exercise strengthens students' aural memory and their sense of pitch on their instrument.”¹⁰¹

Accompaniment Variety

“All music may be reduced to simple chords. Just so, simple chords conversely serve as the ground-work on which to invent and play all sorts of melodies, passages, skips, embellishments, etc.”¹⁰² For the pianist, I believe those words written by Czerny may be applied to both melodic and harmonic creation.

One struggle for many young improvisers involves a lack of knowing what to do with the accompaniment. Obviously, there are countless ways a pianist can play the notes of a blocked or broken chord. Have the student spend time alone at the keyboard playing through chord

¹⁰⁰ Wigram, *Methods and Techniques*, 65.

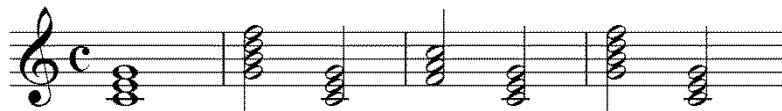
¹⁰¹ Hinz, *Helping Students*, 36.

¹⁰² Czerny, *Letters*, 80.

progressions. He/she should start with a simple progression that can be played easily. Rather than playing all the notes of the chord simultaneously, have him/her “break” the chord and play the notes separated.

The keyboard music of the Baroque and Classical periods provides excellent examples of accompaniment ideas. I will use the first phrase from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Sonata in C Major*, K. 545 as example. At its simplest chord structure, the accompaniment can be summarized as seen in figure 3-11:

Root position:



Inversions:

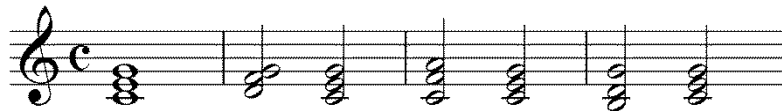


FIGURE 3-11. CHORDAL STRUCTURE OF MOZART’S *SONATA IN C MAJOR*, K. 545 MM. 1-4

To this chord structure Mozart added the melody. Rather than keeping the blocked chords in the final creation, Mozart chose to break apart the chords and use an Alberti bass accompaniment figure (figure 3-12):

Melody with Blocked Chords:



Melody with Broken Chords:

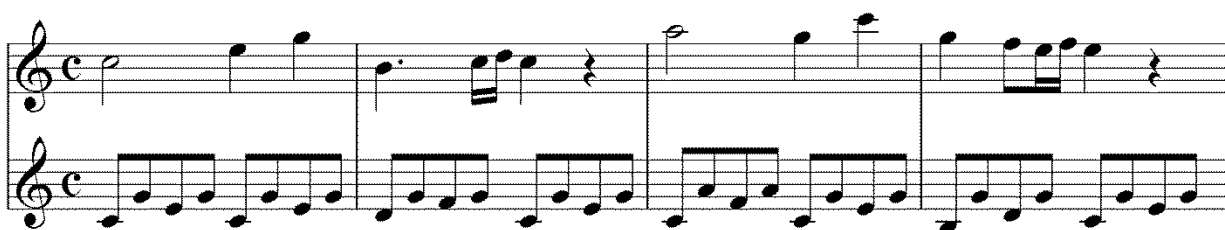


FIGURE 3-12. BLOCKED AND BROKEN CHORDS OF MOZART'S *SONATA IN C MAJOR*, K. 545 MM. 1-4

Encourage the student to spend time discovering what type of accompaniment figures and patterns he/she can create. When the student is first attempting to create accompanimental variety, it may work best to have him/her use only a single chord and play that chord in a repeating one-measure pattern. Have the student continue to repeat this measure in order to try out new ideas and get comfortable with ideas already created. If a student is struggling with creating accompaniment ideas, show the student other Baroque or Classical works (similar to K. 545), or share a few simple personal ideas in order to help inspire the student's imagination.¹⁰³

Figured Bass

Keyboard accompaniment ideas should not be discussed without exploring the figured bass (thorough-bass, basso continuo) ideas of the Baroque period. On paper, figured bass notation only involves a bass note and, possibly, a numerical figure and occasional symbol

¹⁰³ I enjoy using J.S. Bach's "Prelude No. 1" from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* book I. The majority of the work is a chord progression containing broken chords. It is not complicated and, therefore, might serve as a good example to show a student.

(which, together, declare the intervals to be played during that beat). All accompanimental patterns are improvised by the keyboardist.

Figured bass accompaniment is not used in today's musical society as much as it once was. For pianists who do not desire to accompany or play Baroque chamber music, figured bass exercises may seem of little benefit. I believe, however, that they provide excellent opportunities for all pianists to practice improvising accompanimental patterns.

In *Figured Harmony at the Keyboard* (volumes 1 and 2), R.O. Morris provides all the information a keyboardist needs to learn how to play figured bass accompaniment. Depending on his/her current amount of training, some pianists will already know how to explain figured bass notation while others will know nothing about the topic. Morris's information can be useful to both the trained and amateur figured bass player.¹⁰⁴

When the pianist understands the principles of figured bass playing, have him/her practice playing figured bass examples. The second volume of Morris's work provides many examples (primarily chorales) for which the bass alone is given. The improvising pianist can then fill in the remaining intervals (aiming to follow proper voice-leading rules taught in the student's beginning theory courses). In the early stages, Morris recommends playing only the bass note with the left hand while the right hand completes the intervallic requirements.¹⁰⁵

The improvising pianist does not have to become an expert figured bass player. But, as the student works with figured bass notation, he/she will have the opportunity to grow in his/her

¹⁰⁴ While the music of the Baroque period also contained examples of unfigured bass music, I believe the figured bass examples/exercises will be the most beneficial for the student learning to improvise.

¹⁰⁵ Morris, *Figured Harmony*, 1.

ability to improvise while also experiencing one of the major forms of improvisation used by many of the great keyboardists of the past.¹⁰⁶

Advanced Chordal Ideas and Lead Sheets

When a student has made tremendous progress through the chordal ideas mentioned so far, advanced chordal ideas may be presented. Keep in mind that some pianists will have learned these ideas in their theory courses. But talking about this topic in connection with improvisation will allow students to immediately apply many of the concepts learned in the classroom.

If a student has not already learned and experienced playing ninth, eleventh, or thirteenth chords, those chords should now be introduced. Remember, each of those chords generally includes the 7th scale degree but can also leave out certain notes (like the 5th). Use exercises similar to those above to help the student experiment with the layout, feel, and sound of these advanced chords.

The student should also experiment with non-diatonic harmony. These can include secondary dominant chords, secondary leading-tone chords, substitute dominant chords, and many others. Sarath provides lessons, examples, and exercises involving non-diatonic harmonies within chapter 10 of *Music Theory through Improvisation*.¹⁰⁷ As the student grows in his/her ability to use non-diatonic chords—including how those chords can be incorporated into music—the student's database of improvisational ideas will expand and he/she will feel more readily equipped to incorporate elements of transposition and modulation (as will be discussed later).

¹⁰⁶ The first volume of F.T. Arnold's *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass* provides additional information that shows how to create figured bass accompaniment. It also contains treatises and historical information about figured bass playing. Publication information can be found in the Works Consulted section toward the end of this document.

¹⁰⁷ Sarath, *Music Theory*, 169-183.

The use of lead sheets provides the improvising student with the opportunity to apply many of the concepts discussed so far. A lead sheet is simply a notated melody with chord names attached. These chord names are commonly written above the staff and designate the appropriate harmony (similar to figure 3-10 above). Lead sheets are most often found within the world of jazz music, but can also include other styles of music. For comparison's sake, a lead sheet can be likened to figured bass notation.

As the student advances in his/her study of improvisation, I believe it is of value for that student to be able to play from a lead sheet (both of the non-jazz and jazz styles). Certainly, if a student has no interest in pursuing these styles long-term, there is no need to force the student to practice the styles continuously. But, I do feel that it is important for every pianist to understand and experience, at a minimum, the basics of each style.

If a lead sheet was made using the chords from *Amazing Grace* (posted above), it would resemble that of figure 3-13:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the piece 'Amazing Grace'. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: 'C' above the first measure, 'F' above the second measure, 'C' above the third measure, 'C' above the fourth measure, 'G' above the fifth measure, and 'G' above the sixth measure. The second staff starts with a measure rest labeled '10' and continues with the melody. Chord symbols are 'C' above the first measure, 'F' above the second measure, 'C' above the third measure, 'C' above the fourth measure, 'G' above the fifth measure, and 'C' above the sixth measure. The piece ends with a double bar line.

FIGURE 3-13. AMAZING GRACE LEAD SHEET

Have the student practice improvising this (or similar) lead sheets. Any teacher or student could create these lead sheets. As is true with most improvisation, boundaries are given. Here, there is a certain key, melody, rhythm, and length. The improviser has the freedom to do anything else he/she pleases within those boundaries. The harmony could be simple blocked chords in the left hand while the right hand plays the given melody. Or, the harmony can be spread out across the

entire keyboard in a Romantic-music fashion while the melody is worked into the music with either the left or right hand (or both). Lead sheets can be used as exercises that allow the improvising student to let his/her creativity soar while restricted with certain boundaries.

This chapter is not directly about jazz music, but I feel that it is important to say a few words about jazz harmony and lead sheets for the sake of the teacher and student. Again, the improviser may not seek a career in jazz piano, but I believe it is valuable for the pianist to understand the basics of jazz music.

The image shows a jazz lead sheet with two staves of music. The first staff contains six measures of music with the following chord symbols above the notes: C, CMAT7, FMA7, FMIN7, DM7b5, and CMAT7. The second staff contains six measures of music with the following chord symbols below the notes: Am7, D9, DM7, G7, G7b9, and CMAT7. A measure number '5' is written below the first note of the second staff.

FIGURE 3-14. JAZZ LEAD SHEET

Figure 3-14 shows a simple jazz lead sheet. It is structured in the same way as figure 3-13 (*Amazing Grace* lead sheet). The main difference between the two lead sheets is how the chords are labeled. Jazz composers tend to write numbers by the chords that designate notes used beyond the triad. There will be many non-diatonic notes and chords present in a standard jazz lead sheet.

For the sake of the improvising piano student, teach the fundamentals of jazz chords. The most overwhelming thing for most classical pianists when reading jazz music is how to determine what notes belong to the chord listed. I will use *Dm7^{b5}* from figure 3-14 to help summarize how these chords work. Simply break down the chord-title character by character and read it left to right. *Dm* means a D minor triad (if it were major, it would stand alone as *D*). The 7 that immediately follows means to add the note a seventh above the chord's root (in the

key of D minor). The $b5$ means to flatten (lower) the 5th of the chord. Therefore, consider this process:

$$Dm = D, F, A$$

$$Dm7 = D, F, A, C$$

$$Dm7^{b5} = D, F, A^b, C$$

Jazz books containing hundreds of lead sheets are available for purchase (and are fairly inexpensive). If the student desires to pursue jazz music further, recommend that he/she purchase a book of lead sheets (often referred to as *Real Books*).¹⁰⁸

Tools of Music Theory

It is through the teachings and concepts of music theory that we can understand all music. For the student of improvisation, it is vital that he/she not only learn the ideas of music theory but truly understand its concepts. Just like proper grammar serves as the fundamental tool necessary to correctly learn a spoken language, so music theory and aural skills are necessary to improvise.¹⁰⁹

For classically trained pianists in higher education facilities, music theory and aural skills courses are requirements of their degree program. So many young music majors do not see any value in these courses because the students fail to see how those concepts and skills affect them as a musician. Applied music teachers have the opportunity to show how music theory and aural skills courses are relevant to a musician. Teaching improvisation provides this opportunity. As a teacher, help the student experience the application of the music theory tools they learn in class

¹⁰⁸ Mark Levine wrote two books that are excellent learning resources for the pianist seeking to play jazz piano music. They are titled *The Jazz Piano Book* and *The Jazz Theory Book*.

¹⁰⁹ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 25.

by utilizing them during improvisation lessons. This can be exciting and inspiring for the music student.¹¹⁰

There is an ample supply of tools taught within a Theory I course that can help a pianist improvise well. This section will cover some of the tools that an improviser can keep within his/her musical toolbox. These tools can then be used during the moment of improvisation. This is not a comprehensive list of all music theory concepts but simply those concepts that can help a classically trained pianist become an excellent improviser.

Keys and Scales

One of the most useful tools for an improviser, especially a pianist, is familiarity with every major and minor key of music. The best way for the student to grow more comfortable with keys is by playing scales. I recommend having the student play one or two scales prior to every piano practice session. The scale should differ each time. Playing scales serves as an excellent warm-up tool but also helps the student learn what notes belong to which key.

Rather than having the student play the scales in a simple ascending-descending pattern, offer a format that utilizes parallel and contrary motion:

Right Hand: 2 octaves up | 2* up | 2 down | 2 up | 2 down | 2 up | 2 down | 2 down
Left Hand: 2 octaves up | 2* down | 2 up | 2 up | 2 down | 2 down | 2 up | 2 down

**Numbers refer to amount of octaves*

For further variety to help learn the scales, one can create small pieces using the scale. Gerre Hancock recommends, first, having the student create a melody within one octave of a

¹¹⁰ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 11-14.

scale by using only stepwise motion. Encourage the student to create an interesting sounding melody. Next, the student may try adding a second, non-stepwise voice to the melody.¹¹¹ If it helps, the student can create a drone by playing the tonic of the key with the left hand. He/she can then create the melody on top of this drone.¹¹²

One last exercise that may prove useful when helping the student learn the scales involves sequences. Have the student choose a short pattern of three or four notes. Next, have him/her play that sequence ascending and descending within a particular key. Soon thereafter, have the student play the same pattern in a different key. This helps the student learn to quickly shift his/her mind between keys.¹¹³

When assigning the student to play scales be sure to show how such efforts will help with the improvisation process. By knowing the scale, the improviser knows the notes of the corresponding key. And by knowing the notes of the key, the improviser has an automatic framework within which he/she can begin improvising a piece of music.

Transposition

As the student grows in his/her ability to play all major and minor scales, thereby comfortably identifying the notes of every key, transposition can prove to be a useful tool. Aaron Berkowitz adds that “through rote rehearsal of any formula in all keys, the student can internalize the fundamental tonal relationships underlying the formula.”¹¹⁴

In a similar fashion to the exercise mentioned at the end of the previous section, have the student create a short melody and play it in a key of his/her choosing. Challenge the student to

¹¹¹ Hancock, *Improvising*, 1-6.

¹¹² Sarath, *Improvisation for Global Musicianship*, 24.

¹¹³ Hinz, *Helping Students*, 34.

¹¹⁴ Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind*, 41.

make a motive, melodic fragment, melody of four to eight measures, or an entire tune (encourage the student to try all of these ideas eventually). Whichever version is chosen, have the student play the musical idea in one key and then immediately transpose it to a new key, primarily using the ear and knowledge of the new key to guide the fingers to the correct notes. At first, have the student transpose up or down by a half or whole step. This may be expanded as his/her transposing abilities grow.¹¹⁵

Modulation

Carl Whitmer defines modulation as “the process of changing easily and smoothly from one key to another.”¹¹⁶ While modulation does involve the changing of keys, it may or may not have the same melodic pattern in each key (as would direct transposition). Modulation can be useful during improvisation as it provides a way to lengthen a piece of music while preventing the music from becoming repetitive or monotonous. C.P.E. Bach, though, warned his students to avoid any form of modulation if the improvisation was to be short.¹¹⁷

Whitmer provides tips to help the improviser modulate. He first suggests that when moving to the new key, at the point of modulation, the two chords should share a common tone. This is not necessary but helps create a smooth transition. Keep in mind that common tones may involve enharmonics as well (e.g., one could move from the key of F major to F# major because a B^b note is the same as an A[#]).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Hinz, *Helping Students*, 36.

¹¹⁶ Whitmer, *The Art*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Schenker, *Masterwork*, 3-4.

¹¹⁸ Whitmer, *The Art*, 11-13.

Whitmer further suggests that the student use dominant seventh chords to help with the modulation process. This involves moving through the circle of fifths. Consider the following chord progression which moves from the key of F major to, ultimately, A^b major:

$$F \rightarrow F^7 \rightarrow B^b \rightarrow B^{b7} \rightarrow E^b \rightarrow E^{b7} \rightarrow A^b$$

The transition is made even smoother if a motive from the old key is presented in the new key.

Whitmer recommends that when a student is ready (i.e., comfortable with all keys), give the student a beginning and end key then let him/her figure out how to smoothly modulate from one key to the other. This works well as an exercise during a lesson and as a homework assignment.¹¹⁹

Variety

In improvisation, as with all musical performance, monotonous playing lacks appeal. One should avoid using the same small ideas and motives too frequently. As Czerny stated, “Nothing is more disturbing to the effect than the recognition that [the improvisation] has been drilled into the performer.”¹²⁰ Repeating an idea is certainly acceptable, but there are many elements that can be added or subtracted from the improvisation that can prevent the piece from becoming “disturbing” to the listener.

The melody is a great place to add variety to the improvisation. Help the beginning improvising student remember that a melody often involves using the notes of the accompanying harmony as well as passing tones and neighbor notes. Sometimes, inserting a non-diatonic note (non-chord tone) can add a beautiful or haunting effect to a melody. As an assignment, have the student experiment with melodic variety.

¹¹⁹ Whitmer, *The Art*, 11-13.

¹²⁰ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 11.

Further variety of the melody can involve contour. Melodic contour (shape) is present in the repertoire played by a classical pianist. If the student does not already understand this concept, use his/her current repertoire to show examples of melodic contour. Sarath suggests having the student do what he calls *Graphic Formal Analysis*. It requires no musical training (hence, why it is a useful tool for first-semester freshman). Simply have the student listen to a piece of music and sketch the overall shape of the tune with a pencil. If the piece is long, have the student sketch the shape of a melody or section from the piece. The sketch can involve whatever imagery the student prefers. Have the student attempt this sketch with three pieces that all contrast in style (perhaps classical, jazz, and modern rock).¹²¹

I recommend a similar exercise that involves two parts: first, just as in the exercise suggested by Sarath, have the student draw the shape of the music heard. Make it simple—just a curved line. Then, second, draw a shaped line (aside from any music) and have the student attempt to improvise a melody based on that shape (with or without harmony depending on the ability of the student). This could look similar to figure 3-15.

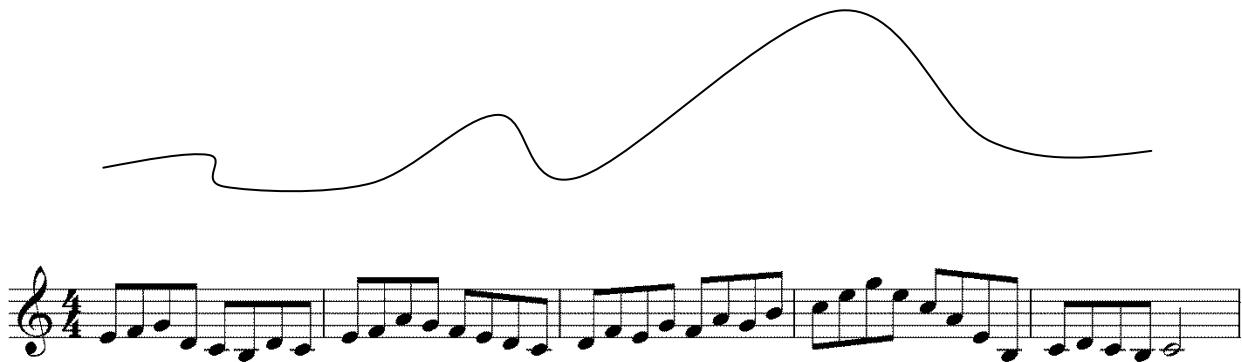


FIGURE 3-15. MELODIC CONTOUR EXERCISE

An important addition to melodic contour involves dynamics. As the line ascends, often the dynamics grow louder. As the line descends, the dynamics grow softer. Encourage the

¹²¹ Sarath, *Music Theory*, 12-14.

student to draw his/her own line and then improvise a tune that matches the line. Have him/her use dynamic extremes (*ff* and *pp*). In addition, the higher parts of the line might include faster notes while the lower parts could include slower notes (variety of density).¹²² These are ideas to help the student realize the enormous variety of options available during an improvisation.

Whitmer provides a list of ideas that a beginning improviser can use to add variety to a melody and/or harmony:

1. Legato vs. staccato
2. Registral change
3. Tempo change
4. Rhythm (strict vs. rubato)
5. Pedaling: sustain, no pedal, una corda
6. Solid chords vs. broken chords
7. Scalar work vs. arpeggios
8. One key vs. multiple keys¹²³

These little details can add great variety when musical material is repeated in an improvisation. Just as most phrases relate to an overall topic during a conversation, so in improvisation the musical ideas should relate. But, it is pertinent that these ideas are approached from a variety of angles (using the concepts mentioned above) to prevent an improvisation from sounding unimaginative.¹²⁴

Encourage the improvising student to reuse ideas that he/she has enjoyed from the past. This can help prevent the overuse of a single musical idea. The material the student reuses may be of his/her own creation or it may be borrowed from another composer. J.S. Bach was a gifted improviser who reused musical ideas.¹²⁵ Even Czerny suggests that the improviser store up in memory a “large assortment of favorite motives and melodies from operas, ballets, folksongs, and all such material that has attained general popularity.”¹²⁶ Encourage the student to allow the

¹²² Sarath, *Music Theory*, 4-5.

¹²³ Whitmer, *The Art*, 24.

¹²⁴ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹²⁶ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 87.

masterful ideas of previous composers to shape the way he/she improvises by borrowing some of these composers' musical ideas.

This musical toolbox can include far more ideas than those listed above. Many new improvisers will be tempted to try to use all of these ideas at the same time. Often, this results in chaos. But, as Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond point out, "the maturing improviser realizes the value of knowing what tools to apply and when to apply them (less is often more)."¹²⁷

Listening and Playing by Ear

James Oestereich and Earl Pennington point out that "the value of one's ear cannot be overestimated. Without exception, the best improvisers have the best ears."¹²⁸ Listening is an extremely important tool of improvisation. In today's society, we tend to hear well but listen poorly. Hearing is automatic, while listening takes intent and effort.¹²⁹

Many performers of notated music tend to rely on the notation rather than elements of the ear. Improvisers tend to play by ear but are often less successful at reading music.¹³⁰ These two worlds should not be separate. By teaching improvisation to classically trained pianists, musicians can learn to play well by ear and notation. Good improvisation is created when a musician's aural and technical abilities combine to create music.¹³¹

All higher education piano students take aural skills courses as a part of their degree program. Many students dread these courses because they do not see how these ear training skills are applicable to them. Unfortunately, ear training skills are rarely discussed in a private

¹²⁷ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 85.

¹²⁸ Oestereich, *Improvising and Arranging*, 26.

¹²⁹ Matthey, *First Principles*, 35.

¹³⁰ Musicians most comfortable playing by ear are commonly jazz musicians, gospel/church musicians, popular music artists, and those raised on the Suzuki Method.

¹³¹ Hinz, *Helping Students*, 32.

lesson setting. I believe this is, in part, because teachers do not want their students to primarily play by ear rather than relying on the written notes. Instead of avoiding the topic of ear training within a private lesson, why not incorporate it so that the student can learn to use ear training skills to his/her advantage in performance?

We, as teachers, can help guide the student's ear, not as a means for disregarding notated music, but as an additional tool to help the student learn, understand, and enjoy the repertoire. The teacher has the power to help each student realize the importance of ear training by showing him/her how to apply it to the world of improvisation.

Many of the ideas that I will mention in this section can be practiced by the student on his/her own (away from the lesson). Teaching ear training should not use much of the allotted lesson time. If the student will work on ear training for a few minutes each day, both the student and teacher will begin to see prosperous results.¹³² According to Ran Blake's excellent listening book *Primacy of the Ear*, letting the ear have a large role during performance will allow a truly personal style to emerge in the student's improvisations.¹³³

Scales, Intervals, Chords, and Rhythm

In order to better incorporate the benefit of listening to an improvisation, the improviser should be comfortable audibly recognizing various scales, intervals, chords, and rhythms. For the improvising piano student, this concept will have been taught to him/her through ear training courses. Again, though, if the concept is encouraged and used in the private lesson when discussing improvisation, the student can better understand one of the many ways that ear training courses can benefit a musician.

¹³² Oesterich, *Improvising and Arranging*, 27.

¹³³ Blake, *Primacy*, 2.

Singing is an important asset to ear training and helps internalize the sound. Many piano students may not feel comfortable singing in front of people. Allow the student to work on these exercises privately, but do help him/her feel comfortable singing during the lesson. This comfort can often come by starting with simple singing exercises and singing along with the student.

Begin with the major scale. Help the student hear and sing the difference between a half step and whole step. Then, teach the student the major scale pattern of half and whole steps (W-W-H-W-W-W-H). For most music majors, this concept will have already been learned. The student can use a syllable such as “la” to sing each note of the scale. Have the student, first, sing the scale up and down while playing (or having the teacher play) the same notes on the piano. Then, play the first note of the scale and have the student sing the rest.¹³⁴ When ready, the same approach can be taken with the minor scales. After the student has worked through the major and minor scales (even just a little), try playing some of the scales and having the student identify each scale by solely using his/her ear.

While working on scales (or after), help the student focus on aural interval identification. Again, start with singing. The main intervals with which to be concerned are those within the octave. Just as with the scales, the student should both sing the intervals while playing them on the piano and sing them with no accompaniment at all.

For initial training in singing intervals, have the student learn songs that contain melodies starting with the particular interval (e.g., within the first four notes of the beginning of “Happy Birthday” a major second is sung ascending and descending). In “Appendix A” of *Primacy of the Ear*, Blake provides an excellent list of suggested songs to help the student remember ascending and descending intervals.¹³⁵ Too often current ear training courses emphasize

¹³⁴ Oesterich, *Improvising and Arranging*, 27.

¹³⁵ Blake, *Primacy*, 59-66.

ascending intervals more than descending. Be sure the student practices both equally. If the student is up for a challenge, let him/her find other tunes that appropriately fit the assigned interval.

Encourage the student to practice these intervals in his/her head without singing them audibly or playing them on an instrument. This requires the student to use the *mind's ear* to hear the interval. The act of creating sound-memory (aural memory) will allow the student to learn to hear sounds before he/she plays or sings them (an important tool for improvising).¹³⁶ Students can test their sound-memory abilities by correctly identifying intervals that someone else plays or sings.

Furthermore, as the student grows comfortable singing scales and intervals, challenge the student to sing and audibly recognize chords. Start with major and minor triads, but when the student seems ready, diminished and augmented triads can be incorporated along with seventh chords. Audibly identifying inverted chords presents an additional challenge.¹³⁷ Chord ear training can be further practiced by having the student identify a chord progression that the teacher plays or that a recorded song uses. Often, mainstream popular tunes have simple chord progressions that serve as excellent training tools for this ability. Nicole Brockmann mentions that learning to identify sonorities by ear is possibly the most challenging aspect of musicianship training, but is also one of the most important.¹³⁸

Just as the student increases in ability to recognize scales, intervals, and chords, so too should the student learn to recognize various rhythmic cells. Most ear training books will contain examples to help the student grow in his/her aural ability to recognize rhythms. But, for

¹³⁶ Blake, *Primacy*, 60.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-74.

¹³⁸ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 14.

sake of variety and interest, have the student pick out a melody of a favorite tune and attempt to both clap and notate the rhythm heard.¹³⁹

As the student is growing in his/her comfort with the concepts listed above, encourage the student to play what is sung and sing what is played.¹⁴⁰ Have the student sing a group of notes, and then attempt to immediately play those notes on the piano. Next, assign the student to sing various melodies that he/she knows (including his/her current repertoire). Be sure the student sings without any accompaniment. This can be done while taking a shower, driving a car, or walking to class. As the new improviser increases his/her ability to hear notes ahead of time using the mind's ear, the student will be able to accurately sing these melodies without accompaniment.

Brockmann offers some additional exercises that can help those within the piano studio better train the ear. One game, which she calls *Sing and Play*, can be done in the private lesson or alone at a piano. The student should choose a major or minor scale. As the student plays the scale up and down, the student should attempt to sing the note a diatonic third above what is being played.¹⁴¹ If this is too challenging, have the student pick a major or minor scale, then go up and down the scale alternating played notes with sung ones. The student might vary this exercise by altering the rhythm or by clapping, rather than playing, one of the pitches.¹⁴²

Intentional Listening

An improviser can discover many new musical ideas by listening to others create music. Because there is so much music available to us in today's society, we listen to a lot of music but

¹³⁹ Blake, *Primacy*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ Wolfe, interview.

¹⁴¹ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 26.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

ultimately digest very little. For a student learning to improvise, it is important that he/she finds a few pieces of music that are appealing and listens to them repeatedly. The student should intently listen in order to better understand what is happening in the music. The musical ideas heard can then be incorporated into the student's personal improvisations.¹⁴³

In addition, if a student desires to play in a particular style, listening to various artists of that style will help the student understand what sounds tend to serve as the pieces to that stylistic puzzle. The student can then attempt to take these ideas and play them on the piano. To play stylistically, it works best to surround oneself with music of that style. This can help the student learn the style faster than simply reading the written rules of that musical style.¹⁴⁴

Encourage the student to step out of his/her comfort zone and experiment with various other styles of music. As the student listens to different performers, have the student question what sets each performer apart.¹⁴⁵ This can be particularly beneficial if the student can listen to the same work as recorded by different performers.

Transcription can be incorporated at this point. If the student hears a melody, solo, motive, etc. that he/she enjoys, have the student attempt to transcribe the exact notes and rhythm. This process will help the student both grow in the ability to recognize patterns in music (intervals, chords, scales, rhythms, etc.) and understand the theory behind a specific style.¹⁴⁶

It can also be of great benefit for the student to record his/her own improvisations. When a student has recorded an improvisation, he/she can then sit down and listen to the created sound without having to worry about determining what notes to play next. This allows the student to properly evaluate the improvisatory playing. It is also useful for the student to write down

¹⁴³ Blake, *Primacy*, v.

¹⁴⁴ Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind*, 85.

¹⁴⁵ Blake, *Primacy*, 44.

¹⁴⁶ Chung, *Improvisation at the Piano*, 190.

his/her thoughts about the recorded improvisation, specifically noting what he/she feels is good and bad about the performance.¹⁴⁷

Repertoire Familiarity

“Repertoire is your primary arsenal as a performer; it is your listening made concrete.”¹⁴⁸

In the last section I stressed the importance of listening to recordings of other musicians. The student should be surrounded with recordings of music in the style of his/her interest, and should listen to, analyze, and think about that music.

I believe, however, that it is also important for the student to experience and understand the basic elements of other styles of music that he/she does not listen to regularly. Musicians can be called upon for various reasons and offered various performing opportunities throughout their life. If a student experiences intentional listening of many styles of music (classical, jazz, film, popular music, etc.) he/she will be better equipped to participate in diverse opportunities. As the student listens to a mixture of styles, encourage the student to attempt improvising in those styles.

Advanced Techniques

As the student grows comfortable with the concepts previously mentioned in this document, there are many advanced techniques that can be incorporated into the student’s improvisation lesson. While the teacher works with the student, advanced concepts might come to mind. The teacher should use discretion regarding when harder techniques should be

¹⁴⁷ Blake, *Primacy*, 48-52.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

introduced to the student. A new and harder improvisation concept should only be taught to the student if that student has a strong grasp of concepts previously communicated.

Though there are many advanced techniques that can be taught, I believe four ideas will prove most useful to the advancing student improviser: form, melodic improvisations, variations, and preludes.

Form

For some students, the best way to start an improvisation is with much structure and little freedom. For others, however, full freedom with no restrictions (freeplay) allows them to best begin their understanding of improvisation. Towards the beginning of the improvisation training, I recommend having the student experiment with both restricted and unrestricted improvisation.

As the student grows comfortable in attempting improvisation, begin having the student improvise within a specified form. A simple ABA pattern is an excellent form with which to start. The student may improvise in whatever style desired as long as he/she makes the B section contrasting and recaps opening material in the concluding A section. When the student attempts to improvise, have the student think about introducing a musical idea, developing that idea to a climax (which might happen during the B section), and then creating a delightful closing.

For a greater challenge, the student can use other forms that have been learned through his/her theory courses. These might include an ABACA form, a sonata form, or a through-composed form (ABCDE). The student can experiment further by following a 12-bar blues form or a standard 32-bar song form (which is, roughly, AABA).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Poulter, *Teaching Improv*, 55.

Melodic Improvisations

When a student attempts to improvise a tune (often in one of the forms listed above), melodies are commonly created that are more complicated than necessary. Young improvisers tend to think that the more melodic notes they play, the better the improvisation. Commonly, though, the opposite is true. The student must learn when to play fewer notes or take rests.

Brockmann points out that many famous classical works contain very simple melodies: Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525 (first movement), Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5 in C minor* (first movement), Schubert's *Symphony No. 8 in B minor* "Unfinished" (first movement), etc.¹⁵⁰ Use famous works like these to demonstrate that a good melody does not have to be complicated.

Czerny compares improvisers to orators. Both strive to develop their subject clearly and exhaustively in the moment of creation.¹⁵¹ Just as an orator would avoid long, run-on sentences that the audience could not follow, so too should the improviser strive to keep his/her melodies short and comprehensible. Allow the audience to leave the performance with the entire melody in their head.

To help the student practice creating various melodies, have him/her find a recording of Johann Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. The chord progression continuously repeats throughout the entire work (I – V – vi – iii – IV – I – IV – V). The student can play the recording and improvise on top of the recorded harmony. This allows the student to put his/her entire attention towards practicing melodic ideas (without having to think about what harmony to play next).¹⁵²

When the student is ready to move forward, have him/her incorporate harmony by playing the chord progression to *Canon in D* with the left hand while creating a new melody with

¹⁵⁰ Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 36-38.

¹⁵¹ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 42.

¹⁵² Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound*, 46.

the right hand. The student can then create a completely new chord progression on top of which he/she can improvise a melody (the student may have already attempted this concept when playing through the forms listed above).

During a lesson, the teacher might find that conducting improvisation is a fun way to help the student practice his/her improvisation skills. Saxophonist Anthony Braxton created the concept of conducted improvisation. Different hand signals from the conductor refer to different playing techniques/languages (e.g., trills, short attacks, long sounds, etc.). The students must improvise using the technique directed by the conductor.¹⁵³ A similar concept can be applied to the piano instructor. Simply choose certain techniques for the instrument (legato, staccato, melodic, harmonic, etc.) and designate a number/hand-signal for each one. Once the student memorizes the short list, the improvisation conducting can begin. This works well with a group but could be applied to individual lessons as well.

Variations

The form of Theme and Variations can be used for an improvisation exercise. Have the student create a short theme. Then, have the student improvise a series of variations on that theme. Give the student a specific number of variations (three to five is a good starting amount) and have the student attempt the exercise during the lesson. As an assignment, have the student improviser create a new theme each day for the next week. With each theme, the student should attempt to improvise at least five variations. Encourage the student to record the improvisations

¹⁵³ Braxton gives out this information directly to his students, but further information can be found in a variety of sources such as Graham Lock's *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thought of Anthony Braxton*. USA: Da Capo Press, 1988.

and bring the audio to the lesson. Together, during the lesson, the teacher and student can listen to the improvisation and discuss what they like or dislike.¹⁵⁴

If the student has trouble thinking of what to change with each improvised variation, have him/her listen to variations composed by masters of the past. This could include J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Mozart's variations on *Ah, vous dirai-je, maman*, or Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, among others. The student can alter the tempo, dynamics, mode, melodic contour, melodic layout (inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion), harmony, etc.

Preludes

Many composers of the past composed and improvised preludes (J.S. Bach, Chopin, Debussy, etc.). Traditionally, a prelude came before another work of music. For past keyboardists (especially of Bach's time), this was a common form of improvising.

For the advanced improvisation student, have him/her improvise preludes to precede composed works. As a starting place, have the student attempt to create a prelude that would appropriately come before one of the works of the student's current repertoire.¹⁵⁵ The prelude should generally match the style of the piece that would follow (i.e., if the student is working on an *Étude-Tableaux* by Sergei Rachmaninoff, the prelude should not sound like an improvisation of Duke Ellington). Furthermore, as an assignment, have the student improvise preludes to works of various other styles that he/she might hear on a day-to-day basis (jazz, popular tunes, commercial music, etc.). These preludes may be of any length, but should not exceed the length of the tune they precede.

¹⁵⁴ Sivan, *Improvisation in Western Art Music*, 46-48.

¹⁵⁵ Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, 15-16.

CHAPTER 4: FITTING IMPROVISATION INTO THE LESSON

Before any teacher attempts to teach improvisation to his/her student(s), the teacher must be able to improvise. The teacher does not have to be a professional improviser, but must understand the basic concepts of improvisation. Good teaching takes good planning. A teacher should not go into a lesson unprepared.¹⁵⁶ If the teacher understands the basic principles of improvisation and has experienced improvisation, then that teacher is fully equipped to help a student begin learning those same concepts.

When the teacher is ready to teach improvisation, it is vital to remember that each student is unique and will learn improvisation in different ways. Therefore, the ideas presented in chapter 3 should be used in a manner and order that works best with the specific student. Should a teacher want an improvisation lesson plan, Ed Sarath provides an excellent two-semester improvisation plan of study at the end of his book *Music Theory through Improvisation*.¹⁵⁷ Flexibility in this plan should always be available should a student need more or less time on a particular improvisation topic.

For most teachers, music lessons do not provide ample time for regular repertoire. It is hard to imagine adding yet another musical concept to teach. For the classical piano lesson, improvisation should consume minimal time from each lesson. The classical repertoire must

¹⁵⁶ Riveire, *Using Improvisation*, 45.

¹⁵⁷ Sarath, *Music Theory*, 356-362.

remain the primary focus. In a thirty-minute lesson, use roughly five minutes on improvisation. In an hour-long lesson, use no more than ten minutes on the topic.¹⁵⁸ Teachers can use the studio class to communicate improvisation concepts that apply to all the students within the studio.

The student will best grow in his/her improvisation skill by improvising. It is important that the student practice improvising on a daily basis. If the student is busy, have him/her use improvisation as part of the warm-up routine (e.g., play scales, play etudes, improvise, and then practice repertoire). The teacher should encourage the student to improvise often and, when the student feels ready, to improvise publically whenever the opportunity presents itself (whether in concert, as a background pianist at a party, or even playing with a band). Encouragement and positive reinforcement from the teacher will help the student desire to practice and use his/her improvisation skills.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Riveire, *Using Improvisation*, 43.

¹⁵⁹ Wolfe, interview.

CHAPTER 5: STYLE-SPECIFIC IMPROVISATIONS

The basics of improvisation as mentioned above can be applied to most styles of music. Since all styles of music are rooted with the same basic concepts (chapter 3), teachers do not have to understand the specific details behind every musical style before teaching improvisation to their students.

Improvisation requires much practice and effort from the student. The teacher merely helps the student understand and grasp the basic concepts. From there, the student is fully equipped to explore and improvise any style of music that is of interest. Encourage improvising students to explore all styles of music.

It is beneficial for the teacher to maintain a list of sources that might help a student learn the concepts of improvising in a very specific style. Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice* gives details on styles ranging from Indian music and the flamenco style to rock and jazz. James Oesterich and Earl Pennington include information on folk, country, blues, jazz, rock, and pop music within *Improvising and Arranging on the Keyboard*.

Since jazz is such a popular field for the pianist, many improvisers will be interested, though hesitant, in pursuing this style of music. I recommend having the student read chapters 23-25 of Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond's book *Improvisation at the Piano: A Systematic Approach for the Classically Trained Pianist* as it gives a brief, but good, background to the rhythm, harmony, and forms of jazz music. Furthermore, Mark Levine (referenced in chapter 3)

wrote two wonderful jazz books that an interested pianist can utilize: *The Jazz Piano Book* and *The Jazz Theory Book*.

Frequently, teachers will find students who are interested in many styles of music. Encourage them to pursue each one. It is wonderful if a piano student can experience all styles of music. The student may find joy and inspiration watching videos by Richard Grayson. At the piano, Dr. Grayson takes popular tunes and styles from all time frames (Baroque through current-day) and improvises them in various other styles: *Happy Birthday* in the style of Debussy, the themes to the *Pink Panther* and *James Bond* put together as a double fugue, etc.¹⁶⁰ These tunes and styles are often given to him by the audience, which proves that they are fully improvised.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Grayson's videos can be found through his website: <http://faculty.oxy.edu/rgrayson/> or by searching "Richard Grayson" on www.YouTube.com.

CHAPTER 6: SOFTWARE TO HELP THE IMPROVISING STUDENT

A benefit of living in the twenty-first century is that we can use technology to help us learn. While there are few computer programs that specifically teach improvisation, many programs exist that can still benefit the improvising student.

Band-in-a-Box is a multi-purpose program. It is easy to enter chord symbols and allow the program to create a “band” that plays the chord progression. This progression can then be looped (set to repeat constantly) and the improviser can practice improvising over the chord progression. The program allows the improviser to alter the meter, tempo, and key (something that cannot be done if improvising over a recording).¹⁶¹

Those who own a Mac computer will generally already possess the *Garageband* program. PC users with Windows can purchase a similar, and fairly inexpensive, program called *Mixcraft*. Like *Band-in-a-Box*, these are multi-purpose programs. They are professionally made, yet easy to use. Again, for the improviser, the ideal benefit is that a chord progression can be entered and then looped. The improviser can then practice his/her improvisations atop the looping chords.¹⁶²

For help in ear training, one may wish to use *MacGAMUT* (www.macgamut.com) or *EarMaster Pro* (www.earmaster.com). Both programs are inexpensive and focus on melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic ear training.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Band-in-a-Box* is compatible with Windows/PC or on a Mac computer. Find more information at www.pgmusic.com.

¹⁶² See www.apple.com/ilife/garageband (*Garageband*) and www.acoustica.com/mixcraft (*Mixcraft*) for more information.

¹⁶³ *MacGAMUT* and *EarMaster Pro* have free demos that can be downloaded from their websites in order to try the software before purchasing.

CONCLUSION

Improvisation is a longstanding musical art that has, unfortunately, faded from much of the classical pianist's world. As has been discussed in this document, there are many reasons that classical pianists do not improvise. I believe, however, that the benefits of improvisation trump any reason that prevents the art.

In higher education facilities, there are many demands put on the teachers and students. Expectations are high. If we are not careful, we will become far too busy to think about improvisation. But as has been shown, improvisation is not only useful to a classically trained pianist, but it also makes that pianist a better equipped musician. To prevent the loss of this art and to enjoy its benefits, we as teachers must learn the basic concepts of improvisation and teach those concepts to our piano students while encouraging them to investigate this art that was once so utilized and promoted by keyboard masters of the past.

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APPENDIX II: SOURCES FOR TEACHING IMPROVISATION TO CHILDREN

Books and Articles:

1. Baumgartner, Eric. *Jazzabilities*. USA: The Willis Music Company, 2002.
The book series (three total) focuses on helping children learn to play jazz. Included in the series is instruction for easy improvisation (among other jazz techniques).
2. Brockmann, Nicole M. *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational games for Classical Musicians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
3. Ward-Steinman, Patrice Madura. "Confidence in Teaching Improvisation According to the K-12 Achievement Standards: Surveys of Vocal Jazz Workshop Participants and Undergraduates." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 172 (Spring 2007): 25-40.
4. Goldstaub, Paul. "Opening the Door to Classroom Improvisation." *Music Educators Journal* 82, no. 5 (Mar. 1996): 45-51.
This article also includes references to many other great sources regarding teaching improvisation to children.
5. Kratus, John. "Growing with Improvisation." *Music Educators Journal* 78, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 35-40.
6. Tallmadge, William. "Teaching Improvisation." *Music Educators Journal* 47, no. 2 (Nov.-Dec. 1960): 58-60.
7. Wollner, Gertrude Price. "Improvisation in the Elementary Classroom." *Music Educators Journal* 54, no. 8 (Apr. 1968): 42-47.

Specific Methods:

- Suzuki Method
Focuses on ear training more than one might find in traditional music lessons (ear training is a major asset for improvisation).

Website:

- Ann Collins Jazz
 - www.anncollinsjazz.com
 - Ann Collins is a jazz pianist who has produced many sources to help students of all ages learn to play jazz. One part of learning jazz is improvisation. See the

Publications page for a list of published material that would be appropriate for the age and level of the child.

- A resource list for further instructional material can be found by clicking the “Curriculum Guide” link within the *Teaching Jazz* page.

Software:

1. EarMaster Pro
 - a. www.earmaster.com
 - b. Ear training software that is fairly easy to use. Any child growing up in today’s society could use the program.
 - c. Seven-day trial available for download. Fairly inexpensive to own.

2. Impro-Visor
 - a. www.cs.hmc.edu/~keller/jazz/improvisor
 - b. Description from website: “Impro-Visor (short for ‘Improvisation Advisor’) is a music notation program designed to help jazz musicians compose and hear solos similar to ones that might be improvised. The objective is to improve understanding of solo construction and tune chord changes...Because rhythm-section (e.g. piano, bass, drums) accompaniment is automatically generated from chords, Impro-Visor can be used as a play-along device.”
 - c. The program is free but can be tricky to use. Older children should be able to figure out how to use the software.

3. Dolphin Don
 - a. www.dolphindon.com
 - b. Ear training software that is very easy to use and geared towards children.
 - c. Fairly inexpensive to own and can be downloaded directly after purchase.