

Classroom and youth band improvisation

KS3

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Introduction

I love to improvise. It's the most inventive, liberating and empowering form of musical self-expression I've ever experienced. When a group of skilled (or even unskilled) improvising musicians come together to collectively and instantaneously create, there's a kind of magic energy that flows through the room from performers to audience and back again. It's impossible not to live in the moment when that moment is yours for the taking.

This experience is not the sole preserve of professional jazz musicians – far from it. With a little subject knowledge and preparation, it's possible to turn your music classroom into the creative space of a real-life jazz club and provide your students with the formative opportunities that I, for one, never had.

'Improvisation is easy, right: you just make something up on the spot.' That's what I thought to my 16-year-old self as my local hub big band took part in a workshop with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra. I'll never forget the rush of adrenaline I felt as I stood up and proceeded to let rip on the bass trombone for my very first solo. I'd gotten it into my head that I was meant to unleash as many notes as I could into the shortest musical space and, being a bass trombonist, make sure the dynamic level didn't drop below fortissimo. It was a tremendously exciting experience, and I was praised for having a go, but, needless to say, I wasn't invited to stand up and solo again that day. Perhaps improvising wasn't so easy after all.

I'm definitely not the only musician to have come to this realisation early on – in fact, I'm in some very esteemed company. Also at the age of 16, jazz great Charlie Parker turned up to a jam at Kansas City's Reno Club with Count Basie's drummer, Jo Jones. So legend has it, the teenage Parker lost the beat and with it the tune, provoking Jones to lose patience and throw a cymbal at the young saxophonist's feet – his cue to get off the stage. The rest is history – but that young genius came pretty close to being consigned to it.

As a primary music teacher myself, I can confirm that more and more opportunities to improvise are available, and the children I work with started this journey before they were six (let alone 16) years old. But it's unlikely the average Year 7 will be an experienced improvising musician, so rather than jumping in at the deep end, why not weave some focused work on this into your existing KS3 schemes and school band rehearsals? Here are some ideas to help get you started.

Musical resources

There doesn't seem to be a lot of published classroom material in circulation with the aim of specifically developing improvisation. Perhaps this is because it's such an aural activity – and indeed, I would encourage an aural approach. All sorts of music studied in class could lend itself to improvisation, however: although jazz is one of the best-known improvisatory art forms, it's far from the only one. This resource focuses on the blues, because that's a genre that's often explored at Key Stage 3. But there's no reason the principles discussed below couldn't also apply to rock, reggae, raga or a whole range of other musical activities.

Whatever the context, some melodic/harmonic material to improvise with is really all you need. And unless you happen to be a highly skilled and experienced pianist or guitarist, in practical terms that means a backing track, for example from a scheme like Charanga (<https://charanga.com/>) (e.g. their classroom jazz units), or real-world resources like the iReal book (see <https://www.irealpro.com/>) or Spotify. The musical examples below could be learnt and demonstrated, but the principles discussed could be applied in most contexts. Modelling of musical elements could just as effectively be made up on the spot.

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Jazz and blues specifics

Because it's a form that's commonly used by in jazz – at gigs and jam sessions across the world – this resource employs the harmonic structure of the standard 12-bar blues.

It also makes use of the conventional blues scale, based on the minor pentatonic: 1, flat 3, 4, sharp 4, 5, flat 7 (sharp 4 being the 'blue' note):

All of the examples that follow are in C major, as that's the most common key for existing classroom resources. However, a wind- and brass-based youth band would likely prefer B flat or F. It's also worth noting that C isn't necessarily the most straightforward key to improvise over. The A blues scale gives you the most white notes on the keyboard.

As is conventional in the blues, all the rhythms notated below should be swung (ie written quavers sound like a triplet: crotchet, then quaver). Making swing sound stylistic doesn't come naturally to everyone, so I'd urge anyone teaching jazz and blues to indulge in some pre-listening in order to get used to the style.

Warming up

For a few students, the very concept of improvisation can take some getting used to. That it's okay to fill a musical space with whatever music you like can be liberating, but it can also be daunting and confusing.

So I tend to start improvisation lessons with an exercise that's impossible to fail: all you need to do is fill a musical gap. A simple body percussion pattern like the one below will work, and all the soloist needs to do is fill the fourth bar with sound (in order to avoid the inevitable banging on tables, etc, I recommend limiting this to body or voice):

Giving everyone in the class a turn takes about three minutes. And what makes this task so inviting is that anything goes. In order to be successful, just make some sound, or not. As the improviser, it's your space to fill as you wish. Over the course of a few lessons or rehearsals, each solo could expand to two or three bars, and provide an opportunity to demonstrate the musical tools and techniques developed in previous lessons.

Listening

Hopefully no one reading this resource will need convincing that it's a good idea for a class or band to be familiar with the kind of sound world we're asking them to create. Moreover, the National Curriculum tells us that pupils should be taught to listen 'to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians'. Unlike some other contexts, listening 'with increasing discrimination' to some of the great soloists like Louis Armstrong or Miles Davis can reap tangible and almost instant rewards in the form of ever more stylistic soloing.

Some focused listening will also provide opportunities to 'identify the interrelated dimensions of music' in order to use them expressly straight away. Despite some of its more questionable aspects, the Model Music Curriculum comes in useful here with some well-selected canonic examples in the appendix, and a case study on Duke Ellington's 'Take the "A" Train' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_MtsIck2mc).

Musical modelling

Alongside any listening your students might do, in my opinion, it's just as useful for them to hear 'what a good one sounds like' live and in the moment, from their teacher. This makes the prospect of their success seem more realistic, and a good example can be encouraging and highly motivating. I love to play a tune, then improvise around it, and ask the class whether or not I was improvising. I know I've done a good job when the class isn't sure.

Unlike with, for example, whole-class instrumental teaching, in order to demonstrate the expressive use of musical elements in this context, playing your main instrument is a very good idea, even if your classroom is a keyboard lab. This gives you the best chance of demonstrating stylistic elements such as articulation, phrasing and melodic shape without having to think too much.

It can also be useful to model 'what a bad one sounds like' – for example a harmonically correct and technically proficient solo, but one that has absolutely no rhythmic or dynamic variation (I might pretend to fall asleep as I'm playing). This underlines the key principle that successful improvisation is not just about ticking off a set of success criteria. There's far more to it than that, and making those dimensions of music interrelate will help a solo come alive.

Learning a tune

In jazz, the tune is generally called the head, and it serves a few purposes in addition to sounding melodically pleasing. It bookends a jazz performance to provide an overall structure of:

Head – solos – head

It also helps everyone get used to the musical style and chord changes, and it provides a musical springboard to bounce off when soloing. If the choice of tune isn't already determined (for example by your scheme of work), something simple but stylistic is more likely to be successful and not take up too much time away from the primary focus of improvising.

The complexity of the head and the reading/aural skill/experience of the group will probably dictate whether or not you should introduce notated music here, but in the spirit of high expectations, it's worth noting that real-life jazz performances (with the exception of big bands) rarely feature melodies that haven't been memorised.

At this point, I put faith in the mantra that 'if you can sing it, you can play it' and dissect a melody into small chunks that can be sung in time with pitch letter names, and learnt at the pace of the group. Even at this early stage, it's a very good idea to embed articulation and phrasing. This is where 'doo-dat' vocalisation comes in (we'll cover more on that later) which I've included in the eponymous 12 bar blues, 'Blue Dye':

Building an improviser's toolkit

An improvised solo may sometimes appear to be effortlessly and spontaneously creative. But as with other forms of musical expression, a good one is likely to make use of all the 'interrelated dimensions' (elements) of music. In the same way as with isometric strength training, systematically exploring those elements gives all of the musical muscles a thorough workout before progressing to compound moves and equipping the athlete for peak performance in their next match or race – or in our case, performance.

The following musical considerations could be focused on along the lines of the following structure:

- ▶ Teacher models variation in a musical element.
- ▶ Free practice with a looped backing track.
- ▶ Partners listen to each other (e.g. alternating four- to eight-bar sections) and feed back.
- ▶ Mini plenary with a few solos.
- ▶ Repeat the process with two or three elements (as time permits).
- ▶ Whole-class jam with as many solo opportunities as possible (head – solos – head).

As with the warmup, some of these musical considerations may appear at first to be rather simplistic. But in my experience, non-pitch-related musical inventiveness is what adds real musicality to a solo: once pitch variation is introduced, everything else goes out of the window. Even if you're fortunate enough to work with fluent improvisers who have started adding tritone substitutions, the message that successful soloing is about more than just pitch cannot be reinforced too often.

The following is not, by any means, an exhaustive list of how to produce a considered, inventive, exciting and (above all) musical improvised solo, but all of my favourite exponents of the art form combine them extremely well.

Rhythm, rests and articulation

Tempting as it is to disappear down the pedagogical rabbit hole of teaching the concept of rhythm, suffice it to say that, for the average fresh Year 7 student, demonstrable understanding isn't a given.

For example, when asked to improvise a one- or two-bar rhythmic phrase, many will provide you with a constant stream of crotchets or, worse, the football chant 'don't clap this one back' (1 2 3+ 4). If your group is familiar with off-beats and syncopation, then of course these can be extremely useful cues to aid more inventive rhythmic improvisation. But if this is a stretch for students arriving mid-phase without much English, for example, let alone technical vocabulary, rhythm is likely to happen automatically when pupils are told to make sure their improvisation includes rests. Look no further than the head to Duke Ellington's 'C Jam Blues' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOlpcJhNyDI) or Miles Davis's solo on 'So What' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqNTltOGH5c) to feel the effect that a few well-placed beats' rest can produce. To reiterate an oft-used phrase: 'Jazz is all about the notes you don't play.'

If you're working with a jazz band or more able students, rhythm and articulation go hand in hand. Big band players will be very familiar with staccato, tenuto and different lengths of accent being specified, sometimes with more than one of these on the same note. It pays to vocally articulate these: perhaps that's why 'doo-dat' phrasing comes to mind when many people think about jazz (e.g. 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing').

Modelling is vitally important here and, in addition to demonstrating four- to 12-bar passages, call and response is a valuable ally in encouraging rhythmic inventiveness as well as relaxed swing rhythm.

Another stylistic feature is to start a phrase on the up beat. The following examples progress from simple yet effective phrases to the kind of syncopated rhythmic figures that commonly occur in big band playing. They can be clapped or played on one pitch:

The image displays four staves of musical notation, each representing a different rhythmic pattern. The notation uses stems and flags to indicate rhythmic values, with rests used to create syncopated rhythms. The patterns progress from simple to more complex syncopated figures. Each staff begins with a double bar line and a repeat sign, indicating that the pattern can be repeated.

Dynamics and phrasing

It's a tired cliché to joke that instruments such as trombones and drumkits have two dynamics: on and off. But without specific attention to dynamic variation, this could indeed be the case with your entire ensemble.

Stark dynamic contrast can be incredibly effective. Take Count Basie's 'Moten Swing' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDKdDinMhB4), for example. But more subtle dynamic shape is also vital to well-balanced phrasing. Miles Davis is again a fine exponent here, and dynamic variation accompanies the rise and fall of the pitch in a good number of his most famous solos. Even if dynamics, articulation and phrasing aren't explicitly written into a tune, an experienced jazz musician will likely put them in to shape it, just as a professional snooker player wouldn't play many shots 'plain ball'.



Pitch

It may sometimes seem that the average jazz solo (especially anything written or performed after about 1964) incorporates a stream of seemingly randomised pitches. But anyone who's asked their students to just make something up without a scale or fixed parameters will know all too well that it's eminently possible to play the 'wrong note' even if, to some, complex jazz harmonies sound 'out of tune' to start with.

So in order to ensure that the 'right' notes occur more often than not, it really helps to set up a musical environment where it's almost impossible to play the wrong pitch. This is where the 12-bar blues is a useful ally: throughout the entire structure, the same six notes (see above) will fit.

With many groups of young musicians, however, simply writing these pitches on the board, sitting back and letting them get on with it is likely to be a step too far. You may well see the mental cogs turning in real time as the average student painstakingly works their way up (and, if you're lucky, back down) the given scale. That it's desirable to mix up the pitches and not just ascend and descend ad infinitum may even require explicit explanation.

It might sound counterintuitive, but what really helps to develop the creative exploration of pitch is restriction – a good deal of it. With the previously discussed non-pitch-related elements, there was no choice but to creatively explore due to the absence of pitch variation. The same is true when given just two or three different pitches with which to construct an interesting solo. I suggest starting with scale degrees 1, flat 3 and flat 7, as in the example below, because they'll give solos a 'bluesy' feel straight away. Please note the continued presence of all the other elements we've discussed!



Thereafter, it works to gradually introduce the other scale degrees, leaving sharp 4 (the blue note) until last. Some caution is advised with the blue note as it makes most sense in passing, but can sound uncomfortable when emphasised too often. Consider it like adding seasoning to a fine meal: don't use too much, or an otherwise beautiful solo will just taste of salt.

From improvisation to composition

Let me be clear: improvisation is so much more than a means to composition, but it can certainly be used that way. A short rhythmic phrase could be repeated on one or two pitches to form an instant backing riff. A four- or even two-bar phrase could be repeated to produce a perfectly passable head: many such melodies have stood the test of time and are often played. Just listen to Woody Herman's 'Woodchopper's Ball' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxyj432cpwl) to get an idea of this.

Beyond the blues

There's a lot more to jazz than the blues, and a lot more to improvisation than jazz. And the 'real book' of jazz standards only scratches the surface. But once the concept of spontaneously constructing a melody in relation to a given harmony (chord changes or just 'the changes') is learnt, then there's almost limitless scope for exploration.

It's likely that your students will come across music with more complex harmony, and that one scale won't be enough to get them through an entire chorus. To an extent, it's possible to work out simpler or more standard changes by ear: many students will do this naturally, but this approach can only take a soloist so far.

Resources from Hal Leonard and Jamey Aebersold provide hundreds of books in all manner of styles that could provide an accessible way in to working with more complex changes. These tend to feature high-quality backing tracks and lead sheets in appropriate clefs and for transposing instruments. But what makes them accessible is that as the chords change, so do the scales, and these are written out for the soloist. With band arrangements that contain solo sections, I've found value in doing this – it removes some of the theoretical mystery that comes with jazz harmony, and aids confidence.

Working with more advanced players

Experimenting with the elements above will take an emerging soloist a long way indeed. But with a full range of pitches and harmony available, there's scope for a great deal of melodic exploration.

After a few rehearsals or, say, with a Key Stage 4 or 5 class, it might now be time to look at melodic shape and mixing steps and leaps. Contrast can come not just dynamically but also in pitch range, note length, phrase length, tone quality or, in the case of chordal instruments, texturally. Extended instrumental technique can be utilised, too. For example, jazz musicians frequently use 'scoops' and 'falls' to start or end a phrase or sequence of notes.

As your young improvisers continue to find their voices and develop individual styles, adding to their toolkit could become quite bespoke. For example, if a student struggles with fluency, they could be challenged to play an entire chorus of swung quavers within an appropriate range of pitches. When that becomes effortless, it's not so hard to take a few notes out. If the opposite is true, and a solo is fluent but lacking in rhythmic interest, a useful cue could be to take a few breaths or almost mime (ghost) some notes to interrupt the predictable flow of scales and arpeggios. Professionals do this: it's most obviously observed from watching trombonists!

As musicians delve deeper into improvisation, an invaluable tool is to transcribe the work of their favourite soloists. Due to copyright restrictions, I won't do that here, but it feels fitting to let the music have the last word. So please find below one of my better efforts at a blues solo that incorporates most of the tools described above.