

From improvisation to composition

Richard Barnard

Introduction

Improvisation is an important part of jazz, but is just as crucial a skill in classical, folk or any other musical style, particularly since it relates to composition.

This resource covers the basics of teaching improvisation, and the process of moving fluidly from scales to improvisation and from improvisation to composition, examining how these three elements interact.

The first half of the resource focuses on scales and improvisation, with a demonstration of a teaching approach using a D harmonic minor scale. The second half looks at possible next steps, turning the improvised material into a written composition, first in a one-to-one session, then in a small group setting.

These approaches can be used in remote online teaching as well as live, face-to-face sessions. In fact, composing tasks can be particularly effective with online teaching. There are different challenges, of course, and I will discuss how to deal with issues of latency and delay.

From scales to improvisation... and back again

Scales and improvisation are intrinsically linked, and very much a two-way street. As any jazz musician will tell you, the ability to play scales and arpeggios fluently in different keys is the foundation to becoming a proficient improviser. It's perhaps less common to think about the reverse: that improvisation using a scale will help the process of learning the scale itself, and make students more comfortable playing in that key.

I always like to encourage my pupils to use improvisation as a way of getting to know a scale better, even if they're not confident improvisers or even playing any jazz pieces.

Why improvisation helps scales

Improvisation in lessons can provide the following benefits:

- ▶ Getting to know the scale more thoroughly and 'inside out'.
- ▶ Exposing areas of the scale that the student needs to know better.
- ▶ Becoming more aware of the function of the notes of each scale, and their relationships to each other and to various chords (eg the leading note, the tonic, the major/minor 3rds).
- ▶ Encouraging the student to play around with specific areas of the scale to get to know it more fluently, without always starting from the beginning.
- ▶ Giving a more interesting and creative way of practising.
- ▶ Showing the students the reason and motivation for learning scales – ie making music!

How to teach students to improvise with scales

Because improvisation is often an intimidating idea that puts off many students, it's important to move from as seamlessly as possible from what they can do to what they can't do yet. You can start with a simple scale and gradually move into improvisation without them realising until it's too late.

Here are some guidelines to achieve effective work on improvisation, broken down into the following areas:

- 1 Preparation
- 2 Parameters
- 3 Playfulness
- 4 Practice

Richard Barnard is a composer and music educator. Alongside commissioned compositions for professional artists and ensembles, he leads creative education projects across the UK for Welsh National Opera, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Turtle Key Arts and others. He is a visiting music teacher at Bristol Plays Music, where he teaches saxophone and clarinet.



I use the word 'scales' as a general term to cover scales, arpeggios, modes, etc.

Preparation

Before the lessons:

- ▶ Prepare some accompaniments or get hold of some material to help (see below for examples of materials).
- ▶ Design your own simple accompaniment sheets.
- ▶ Practise some of your own phrases on modes or scales as demonstrations.
- ▶ Learn some simple grooves on keyboard or guitar in relevant keys. If you only have access to a single-line instrument, you could prepare some basslines or simple riffs that could accompany improvisation.
- ▶ Plan your teaching process carefully, but leave enough flexibility to take the lesson in different directions in response to students' ideas and abilities.
- ▶ Make sure the room is set up appropriately to allow good communication between you and the students, eg that they're able to see visual cues to stop and start.
- ▶ If teaching online, make sure the audio quality is as good as possible (eg using external microphones). You may want to send accompaniment tracks in advance for students to play along with from their end, avoiding the issue of delay.

Parameters

It's important to set clear parameters for your students, a framework in which they can improvise and express their ideas. Sometimes, the stricter the parameters are, the easier it is for the students to freely improvise. This is particularly true of stylistic parameters. It's often helpful for you to have a clear plan and reference point for what style or genre you are working within, eg blues, tango, classical and so on. Even if the student isn't consciously aware of the particular stylistic 'rules', establishing a stylistic framework will help the student know what is expected of them, and what kind of musical language they're using.

Consider setting up the following parameters:

- ▶ A set of notes, scale or mode that the student could play or learn confidently.
- ▶ A time signature and tempo.
- ▶ A 'groove' or rhythmic style. (Is it swung? Does it involve syncopation?)
- ▶ A length of time to improvise (eg four bars, eight bars, two short phrases).
- ▶ An atmosphere, story or picture – a title can help this.
- ▶ A starting note or ending note.
- ▶ A certain shape or direction (eg moving from low register to high register, simple to complex, long notes to short notes).

Can you make the parameters non-verbal?

So much can be communicated through musical cueing and physical gesture, eg playing something to the student and gesturing for them to respond. What you play to them will encourage them to respond within a certain style, rhythmic feel and phrase length. If the student is confident with different scales, you could move to new keys or chords and encourage them to find the notes that fit by ear. Setting up the parameters non-verbally is a great way of maintaining the flow of music-making, saving time and cutting down on talking.

Playfulness

Improvisation should be an enjoyable and creative exercise. It's about spontaneity and communication. Set up an environment within your lesson so that this can happen easily (see also under Preparation).

Encourage your students to:

- ▶ Trust their instincts.
- ▶ Enjoy the process.
- ▶ Avoid overthinking or second-guessing their initial ideas.
- ▶ Be committed and trust their fingers to make the decisions.
- ▶ Allow and embrace mistakes!

Idea: take an existing piece the student already knows and improvise a new section or add an extra improvised cadenza. You already have a clearly defined style and some musical material to draw on.

Practice

To get better at improvisation, students need to improvise often, which will in turn build their confidence and make it a habit. They should familiarise themselves with a bank of ideas and phrases, having them at the tips of their fingers (literally!) and use them as starting points or elements to build with.

Particularly in jazz, listening and copying other musicians is the best way to learn the tools and tricks of improvising. Encourage students to listen and analyse music regularly. Perhaps bring in recordings or discuss something they've listened to themselves.

You could design exercises involving transcribing improvised solos by ear, or ask students to learn a particular phrase in different keys and use the phrase in an improvisation.

Demo 1

Here is a demo of an approach you could start with in order to take a student without much improvisation experience from learning a scale to improvising on that scale.

In this demo example, if you want more of a jazz focus, you could swing the quavers, or create a more syncopated, tango-influenced accompaniment. It could also work with a rhythmically simpler, more classical style.

This demo can work well in an online one-to-one session. Maintaining a continuous shared pulse is not possible, so you'll need to allow gaps between turn-taking phrases, making clear that there will be pauses in between each phrase to allow for the delay.

"Please play me your D minor scale"



"Well done. That scale fits over chords in D minor.
Play it again and I'll play chords"



"Now play up and down the scale again, but change the rhythm a bit.
You could play some notes longer, play some notes shorter, or repeat some of the notes.
I'll go first, then it's your turn."

[example]



"Great, now start and end on the low D,
but you can go anywhere in the scale you want.
I'll go first again."



"Let's take it in turns to play short 2-bar phrases, which are different each time.
You can start and end on any note this time, but keep to the D minor scale.
We'll try this without accompaniment, so keep feeling the 4/4 pulse."



Troubleshooting

PROBLEM: Difficulty with scale fluency or a restricted range of notes.

SOLUTION: Reduce the number of notes, perhaps taking the first few notes of the scale. There are plenty of possibilities with only three or four notes, particularly if you focus on rhythm.

PROBLEM: Lack of confidence as an improviser.

SOLUTIONS:

- ▶ Avoid the word 'improvisation' if using it makes some students shut down. Notice that the word is never mentioned in the above demo. Alternative instructions include: 'Let's just noodle around on these notes', 'Play me a phrase', or 'Answer this phrase with one of your own.'
- ▶ Make it part of another process, eg 'We're going to explore this scale more to get it better for the exam.'
- ▶ Make the tasks very simple and manageable, building step-by-step, starting with what the student is comfortable with.
- ▶ Praise the student often!

PROBLEM: Students' improvisations meander and lack focus.

SOLUTIONS:

- ▶ Ask them to break their improvisation down into defined phrases. Turn-taking will help this.
- ▶ Ask the student to leave rests or even whole bar gaps between phrases.
- ▶ Get them to try to repeat each phrase they improvise.
- ▶ Establish 'rules' to encourage focus, clarity and direction, eg every phrase has to be higher than the previous one.

PROBLEM: Improvisations are too repetitive, particularly rhythmically.

SOLUTIONS:

- ▶ Establish 'rules' that encourage diversity in rhythm or notes, eg you can't start on the same beat of the bar or on the same note.
- ▶ Ask students to improvise just on one note, trying to make every phrase different and distinctive!

From Improvisation to composition

You can move from improvisation to composition at any stage. Making this move doesn't require the student to be an expert improviser. In fact, encouraging 'fixing' their ideas and writing down compositions early on in their learning is very beneficial.

Make the act of composing a natural extension of improvising. The previous improvisation example exercise can lead seamlessly into composition by selecting a short improvised phrase as the starting point for writing a longer melody.

"Let's take it in turns to play short 2-bar phrases using notes in the D minor scale."



"I really liked that first phrase you improvised. Can you play it again?"

"Tell me the notes and we'll write it down..."

[Discuss rhythmic notation & phrasing]



"Play it again and then play what you think should happen next. Don't worry about getting it right first time, just trust your instincts. We can try it a few times until you are happy."



"Let's write that down. What do you think should happen next? Should we repeat the two phrases again, or do something a bit different? Perhaps we could repeat it, but change the ending?"



[Discuss why finishing on the D sounds 'right']

When teaching online, use screen sharing with notation software to notate phrases in discussion with the student. It can work well to send students the draft score of their composition after each session for them to work on at home. You can repeat the process in following sessions, adding to

Now the student has created an eight-bar melody. Make sure you've helped them to notate it on paper or using software. Perhaps record it as well. Explain the importance of 'capturing' ideas. Another way of capturing ideas could be to record improvisation, listen back and pick out best phrases.

Next composing steps

Improve

Work with the student to improve their material, eg add more rhythmic interest or melodic shape. Avoid 'rewriting' or replacing the students' ideas with your own. This is about honing and making the student's own musical ideas as distinctive and successful as possible.

Add detail

Add dynamics, articulation and phrasing. Get the student to make these decisions. Ask them to play how they think it should sound; which bits should be loud, which bits legato or staccato, and so on. Try out different possibilities and discuss which works best.

Develop

You could add chords underneath the melody. This is an advanced skill for the students themselves, but you can involve them in the process. For example: 'Which of these three chords/bass notes (I, IV and V) goes best with the first bar? You play the melody and we'll listen to each one...'

Another development could be adding a harmony line or countermelody. This works particularly well when working with small groups (see below), but it can also be done in one-to-one lessons. Play or record the melody as a loop and ask the students to improvise a harmony line, or a different melody in the gaps.

Always take the time to notate or record the material to make sure it isn't forgotten.

Extend

Set a homework task of adding eight more bars. Ask students to try notating them, or just write out the note names and play the new eight bars to you in the next lesson to notate together.

Working in small groups

Improvisation exercises work particularly well with small groups. In fact, it can be an easier process with more than one student, because you can do the turn-taking process with students, exchanging two- or four-bar phrases. This allows students to help each other find ideas, encourages listening, establishes the sense of a 'conversation' between the players, and gives more space in between improvised phrases for them to prepare their ideas.

If a student is lacking in confidence, it can work well to ask the group to improvise at the same time. This will sound a little messy, but it allows more freedom to make mistakes in a less exposed setting. It can also encourage a more advanced sense of listening and responding to what others are playing.

Similarly, working in small groups can enhance the composing process if handled effectively, particularly as it can open more possibilities for harmony and counterpoint.

Here is a final demo showing how improvisation can move into group composing. We will assume this is a group of three instrumentalists who have used the D minor scale in 4/4 and built up to improvising two-bar phrases in turn.

"Let's take that phrase that [Student A] played. Can you play it to us, please, and we will all play it back together."

"Tell me the note names and we'll all write it down in our books..."



"Now, Student A & B, play your phrase again and then Student C improvise the next phrase. We'll keep looping the 4 bars until you are happy."



"Great! Let's all play that together and write it down"

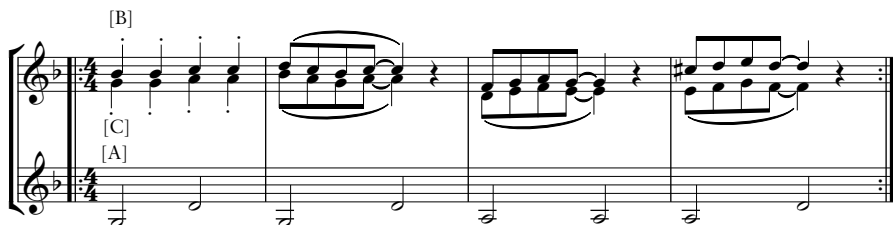
"I think it would sound good with a harmony line.

Student A & C: can you play the tune 4 times, while Student B plays something else that goes with the tune? Perhaps keep the same tune but start a couple of steps higher? You might keep to D minor scale or try other notes. Whatever sounds best to you."



"That sounds fantastic!
Student B, you can write your new part down.
I really like the way you move in 3rds and 6ths.
Those intervals often sound good when you harmonise tunes."

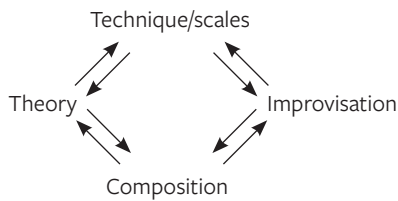
"Let's make it into a proper Trio by adding a bassline.
Student A, I want a bassline that goes well underneath. You can only play minims.
We'll keep playing it through until you've got something."



With online lessons, you may need to do more playing of parts yourself, eg you ask students to play their ideas separately, then you play combined parts back to them on a keyboard to demonstrate how the lines work together.

There are obviously more in-depth ways of working with more advanced students, to move on to longer structures and more complex compositional techniques. However, within instrumental lessons, it's likely that you want the composing work to be short, contained exercises to complement other areas of study. Encourage students who wish to develop their compositions further to keep adding to their ideas at home, bringing them along to future lessons to play through and work on.

The feedback loop



Composition can naturally feed back into performance, improvisation and technical work. Ask the students to learn to play their own compositions as they would any other material, and to work on them technically as performance pieces.

As we have touched on in the example exercises, notating compositions is an excellent way of working through aspects of music theory, particularly rhythm and harmony. It provides a fresh approach if students are getting bogged down in reading notation. Having to work out how to write something down that they've created themselves can be inspiring and better unlock their understanding.

It can be helpful to think of improvisation and composition as part of a feedback loop where different elements affect and amplify each other. This can help the students' improving skills in many different areas, and their progress as whole, well-rounded musicians.

Resources

Jeffery Wilson: *Progressive Guide to Melodic Jazz Improvisation*

An effective set of exercises and teaching materials. This is for teaching beginners using simple modes and different styles. It also comes with backing tracks.

The Faber *Basics* series (eg Andy Hampton's *Saxophone Basics*)

These beginners' books contain short starter improvisation and composition tasks dotted throughout.

Jamey Aebersold: *Jazz Play-A-Long series*

Each book comes with high-quality backing tracks to jazz standards. These are for intermediate and more advanced players.

Mark Levine: *The Jazz Piano Book and The Jazz Theory Book*

These are very advanced and in-depth guides to improvisation and a lengthy, detailed guide to jazz harmony.

In addition, there are lots of online methods and guides for teaching improvisation, for example <https://classicalmusicindy.org/a-step-by-step-method-for-teaching-jazz-improvisation/>