

## Chapter 14

# Getting Started in Improvisation

Let's start with a surprise. You – yes, you – are an improviser. I can assert this with 100% certainty, because, unless you have been mute since you got up this morning, you have had some conversations with other people. You took something you know very well – your native tongue – and selected and arranged some words to express something. Then you listened to the reply and formed an answer to continue the exchange. Nothing was scripted. Nothing was difficult about reacting to the situation and deciding what to say. That is all *improvisation*. You have been an improviser for a very long time. Perhaps just not with your instrument. We're here to change that.

Traditional music education has gone out of its way for some time now to keep us away from creative music. They do this because it's much easier to grade and teach notation-only music. That's one part of the reason that classical musicians don't improvise. The other part of the problem is how classical musicians (and most everyone else) define improvisation. They think: improvisation = jazz = bebop = 220 bpm, which, for classical players equals Never Going to Happen. Jazz is wonderful (I have played jazz guitar myself), but has a very steep learning curve and is not for every player or every instrument. Having that as the only definition of improvisation is very effective at keeping about 93% (or more) of all instrumental players from ever experiencing the wonderful benefits that come from personal expression and exploration of music with their instruments.

So, assuming that you have sufficient curiosity to at least find out more about this creative music thing since you bought this book, let's equip you with a definition that lets you and the rest of the 93% in on the fun. It's simply this: you get to pick the note (pitch). And the style. And the tempo. And the dynamic. And the articulation. And the meter. And the density of notes. The same way you choose your own words and content when you speak. When you get to choose everything, the terror that was once any contemplation of improvising should melt away.

Start with a note. Pick a note that is very easy and comfortable to play. Hold it as long as you want. At some point, you might want to go to another note. Go ahead. Still easy, wasn't it. You don't have to lay down a blizzard of notes. You don't have

to play anything that isn't easy. Always start slow and comfortable, feel safe and secure. That is the first rule of improv. (Rule Two is to break Rule One as often as possible, but that's for later).

How do you know what note should come next? Answer: the same way you know what words to say next in a conversation. You listen. You listen, think, and then make your best guess as to what should come next. The old saying that "there are no wrong notes" is somewhat misleading. In music as in conversation there are some choices that are better than others, but there is always a wide range of possibilities for any situation. A thesaurus will supply you with many options in the words you might choose; all are similar, but each one conveys a slightly different shade of meaning. Your choices in music are the same. You make your best guess as to where the line is going, listen, then react and recalculate for your next effort. The more you do it, the more educated your guesses become.

The most difficult part of getting started in improvising is your attitude. Music education (as well as other kinds of education) have thoroughly trained us in two things that prevent us from getting started.

- 1). What most systems, including education and certain music education emphasize is convergent thinking. There is one right answer, and it doesn't come from you. It comes from far away experts. There is no value on what you create, so why even mention (let alone teach) you that the other half of a comprehensive education is divergent thinking, where there may be many right answers, and they all come from you, from your experiments and reflections and trials and errors.
- 2) Convergent thinking is easy to teach and to grade and is very predictable. Divergent thinking is messy, and unpredictable, and relies on the rich lessons of making "mistakes" to enhance learning. So music education has burned into our DNA the idea that the worst thing that can happen is to miss a note. We need to be perfect, always. That is our goal; all that really matters is perfection. Play the ink and nothing else. Ever. Which gives us the answer to the question of improvisation, and that is "Never." Too scary! Unpredictable! I might make a mistake!

So we think, I can't make up stuff and be perfect so I won't try. I would need to be much, much better on my instrument to try something that risky. But here's the rub, the startling truth: everyone – even beginners – has the technique to improvise. To make their own choices. We don't have to wait to gather more technique before we are qualified to improvise. What we need to get over is the fear of making mistakes. Our new, updated attitude sees mistakes as opportunities to create something new that you otherwise would not have discovered. Mistakes are an important part of the process of learning and of the creation of interesting improvisations. Students in my improv class, the brave ones who have dared to take the class in the first place, are often very anxious the first day of class. What happens is I spend the first week trying to get them to play, and the rest of the semester trying to get them to *shut up*, that is, not play all the time so that some rest

is part of their playing along with the long strings of notes that they learn they can do so easily and well once they start. The reaction of novices is always this: 1. Improv is easy. 2. Improv is fun. 3. What haven't we been taught this from the beginning? 4. Why doesn't everyone do this, all the time?

They are a bit shocked to learn that the lack of improvisation in Western art music tradition is an aberration, both within itself and compared with other musics throughout the world (South Indian classical music, for example, is entirely improvised). The greatest composers in our classical tradition were improvisers: Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, and many more. Musicians for a thousand years after the invention of music notation in the Middle Ages had to do both: read music notation and play by ear, ornament, and improvise. Music education in the last 150 years has been innocent of improvisation with the exception of church organists, thanks to the rise of the conservatory (fixed practices), method book, and huge orchestral compositions. However, improvisation has been coming back in the last couple decades. Every band director in Nova Scotia is now required to do improv games with their students. The new International Society for Improvised Music holds annual conferences. More practice books on the subject are springing up. The MENC requires improvisation training for all music students. Lin Foulk at the Western Michigan University teaches an improv course that every single student has to take. Gary Smart has a similar course at Northern Florida University, as does Eric Edberg at DePauw University. Tanya Kalmanovitch is doing wondrous things at the New England Conservatory. A distant tsunami of creative music and music education is gathering on the horizon, and high time for it.

The pace of universal adoption of creative music is still slow (or rather, too slow for my tastes), and there is still a long way to go on the road to universal acceptance in the hallowed halls of academia; it took jazz a long time to be allowed entrance to the ivory towers, and this nonjazz kind of improvisation faces the same resistance to change. People don't like change. Vested interests protect their turf and the limited resources all education is faced with these days. Still, we persist in getting the message out there. Creative music is simply too beneficial to all to keep excommunicated or quarantined. The Aural/Creative tradition in music forms the other half of music study, the complement to the ensconced and entrenched Literate (notation-based) tradition. They are not mutually exclusive. They are partners in comprehensive musicianship.

The best way to get going in improvisation is to get a playing partner and simply start playing together. You will inspire each other and supply ideas and motivation to keep going. Whether you do, or you don't, [shamelss plug alert], you might wish to speed up the process by picking up a copy of my book, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians, 2008*, 352 pages, 566 games, with much how-to explanatory material, resources and bibliography in the back. And no music notation, just

descriptions of what to do. Volume II came out in 2016; it's bigger, at 374 pages and 642 games, but with less explanatory material (since that is in Vol. I), plus new resource material in the back. They are available from GIA ([giamusic.com](http://giamusic.com)). There are several smaller improv books, but you can decide if you want to order them later after you have checked out the Big Book(s). They are listed in the Recommended Reading in the Appendix.

So just start. Don't wait. Start choosing your own notes, discovering your own voice in music. Start acquiring comprehensive musicianship and completing your musical education.

*The chief reason to learn improvisation is simply that our musical personalities are incomplete and underdeveloped if we are unable to express ourselves in a spontaneous fashion. The ability to improvise is central to our musicianship; without it, musicians are simply not 'complete'. – Gerre Hancock, church organist and author of *Improvising: How to Master the Art**