

Abstract

The paper presents a rationale supporting the inclusion of improvisation as a significant element in the instructional process. In doing so the notion of practical, creative involvement as learning experiences in which conceptual understanding of music grammars and formal structure is acquired is vigorously advocated.

A methodology for teaching improvisation is put forward and reviewed with illustrated examples of introductory and early intermediate stages.

Improvisation - The Why and the How

A primary objective of this presentation is to emphasise the importance of improvisation as an element in the instructional curriculum and to give a practical example of a methodology.

I. The Why

Improvisation as Part of the Instructional Process

Then

Music is the only art form in which the element of creativity is allowed no significant place in the instructional process. It is either omitted altogether or trivialised. Since this has been the case for generations, teachers are seriously disadvantaged when faced with a growing demand for instruction which takes account of those skills.

It is, perhaps, the private studio teacher (salt of the musical earth) who has suffered most grievously from a musical education, at all levels, in which the requirements for strict adherence to, and total dependence upon printed scores (memorised or not) have defined the criteria for achievement. Even so, the teaching of theory has generally been unsupported by contextual reference and has been taught as a thing apart from actual performance or invention.

The task of achieving virtuoso standards of performance in an ever growing number of 'classical' styles and dealing with complex theoretical tasks takes up most of the time available for study, leaving little space for experiences designed to develop creative musicianship. The nurture of creative skills both as a medium for self expressions and

as a means of coming to grips with the reality of music grammars and structure has been traditionally non-existent, or given a very low profile in the music education enterprise.

Now

Choice of curriculum, for the studio teacher, has been very largely governed by the requirements and publications of examination boards - collections of pieces in various classical styles. This narrow regime, irrelevant to much of what actually goes on in the musical life of the community, is now in the process of change with a grudging acknowledgement that other musical styles do exist.

Improvisation skills have been a requirement of the ANZCA Music Examination board's Modern Pianoforte syllabus for the last thirty years. From its inception this board has acknowledged the multifarious stylistic nature of contemporary musical life by providing both classical and modern syllabuses. The AMEB, the AGME, the British Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) and Trinity College of Music, London now have syllabuses in which improvisational skills are assessed. In the case of the Associated Board improvisation takes very seriously the realities attending the performance of jazz. The AMEB's requirements for improvisation called for by this board's CMP syllabus impress by their relevance to the demands of contemporary popular music.

Thus, the importance of creative skills has at last been acknowledged. To this observer, this process has been long and tortuous and, because of the backlog of neglect, still has a long way to go. There is a concern, for example, that some exam boards are now offering a choice between improvisation and other essential skills. For example, a choice between sight reading and improvisation - i.e. literacy or creativity! The variety of options offered by examination boards in which non-classical genres are encountered may not provide learning environments in which the high level of technical skill required to perform a Bartok piano concerto is developed, but they do require more penetratingly practical insights into the imaginative management of standard chord progressions, lead sheets, melodic elegance and extemporisation.

The student will be guided in the choice of a particular stylistic emphasis, be it inclined towards the realms of popular musical entertainment or to the classical concert platform, by teachers; by his or her own particular predilections and talents; and by learning experiences which embody the wide range of stylistic diversity relevant to contemporary musical life. In short, informed choices for a musical future will be ensured.

School music teachers have been at the forefront of a more democratic view of the skills and understandings necessary to participation in the totality of contemporary musical life rather than that part of it focused exclusively upon classical repertoire. However the school instructional environment is not entirely suited to the development of improvisational skills except at a primary level where, for example, the Kodaly and Orff systems offer excellent creative learning experiences. Beyond this early stage improvisation is best taught in a one-to-one situation.

In my travels around the country I have been enormously impressed with the standard of private studio teaching. Anyone who thinks that teaching someone to play or sing well is easy has another think coming. The teaching process requires infinite attention to detail and the patience of Job. Most of our successful performers owe their careers to the work of these unsung heroes and heroines.

Economics dictate a standard lesson time of thirty minutes. Thirty minutes in which to deal with technique, theory, aural skills, reading skills, and interpretative skills. Improvisation!? Why bother? Parents want their children to pass exams and there is therefore little time left for the nurture of creative skills.

In What Circumstances Might Improvisational Skills be Useful?

1. Social Occasions

Until recently, the bulk of repertoire set by music examination boards was mainly classical. there was no requirement for the display of the serious musical competencies needed to deal with what, for want of a better term, I have called 'community music'.

I shall define 'community music' as music popularly heard and performed among the community at large. Examples are: music for public and private social events such as Australia Day and Christmas; "Auld Lang Syne", "Happy Birthday..."; nursery rhymes; folk songs; popular ballades from musicals and movies; 'pop' songs; jingles on TV commercials.

Community music enriches and enhances the day-to-day lives of us all, though there are times when we could well do without it. (Try having a sensible conversation while having

dinner at a restaurant where the sound levels reached by the din(ner) music drowns out most of what is said.)

Social occasions, large or small, are often graced by 'piped' music, disc jockeys or hired professionals. When no provision has been made for music and the need for a musician arises, anyone who is known to be 'musical' is likely to be approached. In such ad hoc situations a score may not be handy. Maestro Joseph Bloggs, A.L.A.R.M., asked to preside at the piano, guitar, bagpipes, or whatever will be caught short, responding inevitably with, "I'm sorry, I don't have the music." That is - UNLESS HE CAN IMPROVISE.

Maestro Bloggs is right of course. He doesn't have the music - the musicianly skills that would enable him to be musically independent, creatively expressive and useful.

2. Professional and Semi-professional Occasions.

There are times when arrangements of songs or pieces that pianists are asked to accompany are poor. A better ensemble is often achieved by an accompaniment improvised for the occasion. In this case, of course, the improvisation would be rehearsed and refined as part of the preparation for the concert.

It is worth noting that baroque musicians had to be competent improvisers in order to be employable. Perhaps this is why most baroque performers and teachers of distinction were composers. Mozart's father and Quantz are notable examples.

3. Jazz and Jazz-related music

In the case of jazz-related music, musicians are often required to play from charts which may not even have the melody; only the chord symbols necessary for 'comping' (jazz-speak for accompanying - while waiting anxiously for their turn to solo). In the realms of pure jazz, improvisation is an essential skill.

Is it True that Improvisational Skills Can be Acquired Only by Those Gifted with Exceptionally Musical Talent?

Given a reasonable instrumental technique and a good ear it is possible for anyone to acquire useful improvisational skills.

The great deterrent is fear of the unknown; particularly when the unknown contradicts most of the conventional wisdom of the examination board dominated past. As a child I was once told by a piano teacher "that I would never go to heaven if I played by ear"!

A well-planned and systematic course of instruction derived from and illustrated by the music repertoire representative of all musical styles and informed by constant reference to musical structure and grammar as these exist in the real world of music is the most effective means to the conquest of doubt and to acquisition of useful improvisational skills.

If Learning to Improvise is So Straightforward Why is It not Being Taught

A number of reasons come to mind:

1. The duration allowed for private tuition is too short. Lessons are generally limited to thirty minutes duration.
2. The pressure placed upon teachers, mostly by parents, to follow the traditional pathway of one exam after another leaves little time for creative (read "musical") activities.
3. 'Improvisation' has a poor image among many exclusively 'classical' dealers in musical instruction. Almost certainly since it is associated almost exclusively with jazz. Do they realise that, until the end of the nineteenth century, most musicians, in whatever style they professed, could improvise? It is to the considerable credit of jazz musicians that the art has survived.

II. The How

(Introductory Procedures)

The following notes are intended to give an overview of foundational steps in a systematic plan for the teaching of improvisation.

Systematic development of improvisational skills cannot occur without a sound practical understanding of the music grammars entailed at each stage.

New vocabulary is introduced and taught through teacher modelling. Voice leading and fingering are carefully monitored at this stage and throughout continuing development.

Essential points of grammar are treated as soon as technical fluency has been achieved.

Formulaic chord progressions will predominate in early stages of learning. It is therefore important that the concept of 'interval' as it is employed in analysis of the intervallic structure of scales and chords, is understood.

Stages I and II are foundational. Establishing fluency may take up to a year depending on aptitude of students and tutorial time allotted.

Stages III and IV will require less tutorial time and will complete the harmonic requirements for improvisation in which there is no chromatic enhancement or tonicisation/modulation.

In the beginning simple voicing should be used with repertoire chosen from well known traditional or popular melodies.

Voicing for jazz-related musics may be introduced when a working concept of improvisation has been thoroughly established and a sufficient degree of aural, technical and creative competence has been achieved.

¹Stage I (V-I)

Teacher Mind Set

The teacher is aware of:

- the significance of V-I as the harmonic axis (of functional harmony);
- the importance of immediate, practical application of V-I in the improvisation of simple accompaniments to selected melodies;
- the potential offered by this activity for the practical introduction and reinforcement of music grammar;
- the importance of frequent illustration using music examples from both classical and non-classical musical examples;
- the seminal importance of the fifth as the generator of pentatonic and major/minor scale systems; and
- the kinds of melodic and rhythmic improvisation that the V-I progression will support.

Learning Routines

Voice-Leading

Student plays V-I and understands:

- the law of the half-step; and
- movement to nearest neighbours.

Rhythm

Student will identify the metre of melodies to be accompanied as 'two-time' or 'three-time'.

¹ The V chord is voiced as V7

Practice

Student practises:

- V-I as block chords and accompanies selected songs. (Student and teacher may use the words 'comfort' or 'discomfort' to assess aural suitability of chosen chord.
- V-I as a vamp and accompanies selected songs.
- V-I as a vamp with use of root and fifth in bass and accompanies selected songs.

Teacher will draw the student's attention to the use of V-I in pieces being studied and in selected works from classical and popular repertoire. Sources should not be restricted to solo keyboard works.

Stage II (II/IV-V-I)

Teacher Understands:

- that II and IV may substitute for one another;
- that the progressions II-V-I or IV-V-I are fundamental to the whole harmonic edifice;
- that the roots of these chords are part of the cycle of fifths; and
- that choice of II or IV is often an aesthetic choice (either may feel comfortable).

Student plays II or IV-V-I and understands that II and IV may substitute for one another.

Student improvises accompaniments for known, selected songs using II/IV-V-I and V-I progressions.

Student improvises melodies using II/IV-V-I progressions.

Fluency in accompanying songs effectively in one major key should be established before new major keys and minor modes are tackled. The achievement of aural acuity and security must be a prime consideration in the learning process. Working in different keys in the early stages of development would entail the distraction of technical problems.

²Stage III (Cadential 6/4: V 6/4,5/3; I)

The term 'cadential 6/4' is unfortunate since it tends to give the impression of complexity. It is, however, merely a decorated V-I. Because of its universal frequency it needs to be treated in these early stages.

Incorporating a melody.

Stage IV (I/III-VI-II-V-I);

This progression in which III is often substituted for I is one of the commonest and most useful within the rubric of tonal harmony.

JAZZ and Jazz-Related Musics

Stage I (II-V-I [jazz voicing - IImin9 - V13 - Imaj9])

Similar teaching routines will be advocated.

Tonicisation and modulation will be involved from the beginning.

Melodic improvisation will be modal. At this stage modality will be related to whatever key is indicated by the chord progression being articulated.

Stage II (IImin7b5 - V7b9 - Imin9)

This chord progression here is the next most common harmonic formula found in jazz-related musics after the II-V-I progression. Locrian modes 1 or 2 will be necessary for the IImin7b5 chord while the diminished scale, sometimes called 'octatonic', will be required for the v7b9.

² The 6/4 is NOT a I chord ('Ic" in ancient text books)

Supportive Repertoire

My book, "Moovin' 'n Groovin", contains original pieces for which lead sheets as well as conventional scoring with chord symbols are given. A CD which accompanies the book offers opportunities for playing along with instrumental backing.

The Real Books, now published by Hal Leonard, offer a rich source of jazz standards notated as lead sheets and are indispensable items in the library of the serious jazz musician.

References

Urquhart-Jones, D 2000, *Improvisation in Concept and Practice*. Australian and New Zealand Cultural Arts Limited, Melbourne.

Urquhart-Jones. D 2001, *Moovin' 'n Groovin'* . This book is self-published and is distributed by Encore Music Distributors, 227 Napier Street, Fitzroy VIC 3065.

About the Author:

David Urquhart-Jones was born in Scotland in 1930 and was granted Australian citizenship in 1975.

Having completed three years of course work as a student at Trinity College of Music London (1949-1952), he graduated with the diplomas of LTCL and GTCL. An obligatory two years of National Service in the army followed.

On completion of military service David was fortunate in finding employment as Director of Music at the Forest Grammar School, Reading, UK. He soon became involved in the rich musical life of the community. An appointment as conductor of the Wokingham Choral Society and continuing opportunities to perform as a pianist and bass player with colleagues who were ex-members of major British orchestras provided the ideal conditions for David to 'learn his trade' as a musician.

In 1964 David travelled to Papua and New Guinea where he wrote a curriculum for the education department; devised and taught the music education element in the course for teacher trainees at the Port Moresby Teachers College; established a music school for local and expatriate children; and was the founder and conductor of the Port Moresby Choral and Orchestral Society.

After relocating to Lismore NSW in 1970 where he had been appointed lecturer in music at what is now the Southern Cross University, David established another choral/orchestral society which he directed and conducted.

In 1977 David was admitted to the society of Pi Kappa Lambda (the American National Music Honors Society. The citation is 'in recognition of superior scholarship and musicianship.' He holds a master's degree in performance from the University of Michigan.

On retirement in 1990 he was appointed Artistic Director of the Canberra Youth Orchestra, a newly created post. He retired from this position in 1992 and moved to Melbourne where he became associated with the ANZCA Music Exam board as a director and examiner.

Throughout his professional life David has been continually active as a performer, predominantly in the classical field. He has performed and broadcast with many distinguished British and Australian artists in numerous concerts of chamber music. In addition he has appeared on a number of occasions in cabaret at the renowned School of the Arts Cafe Queanbeyan; played jazz piano on a riverboat; and lead his local ANZAC marches with kilt and bagpipes.

David is now distilling the experiences of a lifetime in compositions which reflect his many faceted musical career. Many of his pieces are set for ANZCA, AGME and the Victorian Certificate of Education music performance examinations. He has given numerous workshops on improvisation in Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia.

