Improvisation as Experience in Music Education: Context & Ideas

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Abstract

This purpose of this paper is to (1) contextualize improvisation as an experiential activity, and (2) presents four practical examples that can be used in various settings such as music classrooms or community venues. The ideas are drawn from previous work: Free to Be Musical: Group Improvisation in Music *(2010) and* Improvisation as Ability, Culture, and Experience *(2013). These ideas continue to be important in my work as a community musician and my hope is that by sharing them I can reinforce the importance of injecting classrooms and community settings with musical events that embrace artistic-expressive thinking and embodied doing, thus ensuring that those that engage in music education will embark on a musical voyage of life-long musical learning.*

Keywords

Improvisation, experience, community, teaching, music, education

Introduction

As music educators, we are aware that creative invention and self-expression is vitally important for our lives. We are also aware of the various philosophical positions that have been offered by musician-educators to politicians, administrators and to the general public, that music-making is a critical means of creative expression. As music educators, we not only want those we work with to embrace their musicking potential but also to connect their encounters with the real world in which they live. In other words, we want people to understand the importance, and the joy, of making and creating music both individually and together.

In this paper, I present some of the ideas from a co-authored book with Patricia Campbell called *Free to Be Musical: Group Improvisation in Music* (Higgins & Campbell, 2010). Some of the ideas align themselves with the spirit of creative composition and the aleatoric movement of the 1960s. John Cage for example created many spontaneous events with his dance. Philip Glass and Steve Reich were the next generation honing influences other cultures and utilizing these within their music. From a music education perspective, we could point to Murray Schafer (Canada) and John Paynter (U.K.), and the ideals of the Contemporary Music Project and Comprehensive Musicianship (U.S.) all resonating with the creative music-making events that are presented here.

The pervasive spirit of the phenomenon known as community music is much of the impetus for this work that forms a key part of my practice (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Higgins, 2012). The ideas are enlightened by the perspective of anthropologist John Blacking (1973), that music is a human phenomenon. He reinforced the idea that as a species humans are innately musical and are all capable of making music creatively, especially when the contexts, frameworks and processes are well thought through. The premise that music is improvised in the course of performance (Nettl & Russell, 1998), as well as the belief that musical improvisation can be nurtured in schools and in many societal circumstances (Solis & Nettl, 2009). John Dewey's (1997) belief in "realizing democracy" within the educational process was also paramount for our sense of the importance of making expressive music within the group, with every group member knowing that they are welcome to contribute, such that the group's product results from the contributions of every individual. Paul Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2002) is central to the position that learning is an act of culture and freedom, and that no one person should be privileged in the community effort to create musically.

Seen here as a small cluster of practical activities exampled from the book *Free to be Musical*, the ideas presented aim to provide frameworks through which music educators and the participants they work with can create environments through which journeys of musical discovery can take place. It is understood that these 'events' will both increase musical knowledge but importantly connect the experiences to the participants wider world.

1. **Be Free**

Short Description

Group members will play a collection of instruments, freely, spontaneously, even almost unconsciously (for a while). The loose structure of the event, consisting of a start and a stop, begins with unconscious musical scribbling but then turns toward conscious musical decision- making. One of the important aspects of this event is that students should be encouraged to concentrate on listening to each other. Questions arising from this activity might be: What is music?

Focus

- Large group instrumental playing
- Listening
- Self-expression
- Independency
- Group work

Resources

Available instruments: Drums and other percussion, band and orchestral (wind, brass, and string) instruments, xylophones and marimbas, keyboards, guitars, recorders and penny-whistles.

Preparation

If time permits, precede this event with *Keep Breathing*.

Arrange chairs in a circle

Try to get all the participants and their instruments into a circle. Wheel the piano into the circle. If electric instruments require amplification, ensure that you use extension cables to enable these performers to be in the space.

Event

Ask the students to arrange themselves into a circle. Ensure that they have enough space to sit comfortably while they play their instruments.

Ask the students to "play" their instrument without thinking too much about what they are doing. In other words, they should initially play unconsciously. Suggest that they might focus on what other members are doing. They could focus their attention on listening to others as they play whatever comes to them. They should be invited to play anything, there are no rules, and there is no right or wrong.

Group members should begin with silence, and end with a silent signal to stop. It may feel chaotic in this early stage, which is to be expected.

Development

Help students to adjust the focus by asking them to switch on their consciousness. This development requires that students retain the libratory spirit of *the initial segment of the event* but that they concentrate on listening to (a) themselves and (b) each other. This segment moves away from unconscious musical scribbling towards conscious musical decisions.

Begin with silence and end with a silent signal to stop, unless the music-making finds its own resting place.

Through this segment, the players will need to make musical choices, posing questions such as: What does this music require me to do? When should I play? How can I make a contribution to the overall sound?

Discussion

When starting *Be Free*, the facilitator may find that employing the breath as a structure (as explored in *Keep Breathing* which can be found in the book) will help some students come to terms with the "blank canvas". The initial chaotic character of this type of playing may feel uncomfortable. Yet this uneasiness often leads to a healthy discussion surrounding the

question, What is music? Open up a debate with group members without fear of an honest discussion of feelings about the event. In moving from the event to the development of it, there is a dramatic shift of emphasis from, unconsciousness toward consciousness. The demand is very different between the segments, as students begin to make clear and conscious sonic and musical choices.

There may be students who are hesitant to play so freely. They may be worried doing something "wrong". Explain that a blank space can be scary, but that it can be filled in any number of interesting ways. Assume them that there is no right way to "play", and that one can always try again, and again.

2. Ensemble

Short Description

Intimate playing experiences demand attentive listening and sonic decision making. The smaller the group, as in the case of any chamber music or 'combo', the more transparent the musical quality. Because it is more exposing than an event like *Be Free,* this event intensifies the communication between and among players and singers. By emphasising critical dialogue after each component experience, group members begin to develop ways of describing what they hear and how they experience music.

Focus

- Small group instrumental playing
- Listening
- Self-expression

Resources

Available instruments, including voices: Drums and other percussion, band and orchestral (wind, brass, and string) instruments, xylophones and marimbas, keyboards, guitars, recorders and penny-whistles

Preparation

Precede this event with *Be Free* to liberate players from fixed notions of musical engagement and to stimulate a free flow of musical ideas.

Arrange chairs in a circle

Try to get all the participants and their instruments into a circle. Wheel the piano into the circle. If electric instruments require amplification, ensure that you use extension cables to enable these performers to be in the space.

Event

Invite the students to arrange themselves into a circle. Ensure that they have enough space to sit comfortably while they play their instruments.

Select smaller groups from within the larger circle, setting up trios, duos, and quartets. There can be a mixture of these configurations,

Each small group will play in an improvisation for an unspecified period of time. The point is to play—anything. Then, together (but without speaking) they are to find a stopping point. Following each performance, there is a small silence.

After the silence, the next group will begin their improvised musical expression. Silence completes the piece.

This sequence continues until every small group has played.

Group members should be invited to reflect on their experience, as both players and listeners. The facilitator should ensure that the dialogue has a critical edge, by asking such questions as the following: "What happened in the piece? How did it proceed? What was the experience like? Who were you listening to? What do you think did not work in the piece? What would you do if you had another chance at it?" Invite members of each small group to comment on their musical process. Follow this up by facilitating a larger group discussion.

Repeat *Ensemble* again but with different instrumental configurations.

Discussion

Players are held accountable in this event for listening to themselves, to the members of their small group as they play, and to the musical inventions of other groups. Encourage a critical discussion surrounding both the process and resultant product of the musical invention.

3. Riff-a-round

Short Description

A riff is a small musical phrase, a short series of rhythmic durations or pitches, a musical cell. It is not unrelated to an ostinato, a short phrase or motif that is persistently repeated. A collection of individuals' riffs, contributed by individual players and singers, have the potential for making a cohesive, coherent, and beautiful musical expression. This event creates possibilities for all group member to invent a 'riff' of limited musical material. As a collection of musical ideas, the group can generate an interesting mosaic of moving musicial ideas.

Focus

- Independent rhythmic and melodic awareness
- Exploration of a series of notes
- Melodic invention
- Group sound awareness

Resources

Available instruments (including the voice): Drums and other percussion, band and orchestral (wind, brass, and string) instruments, xylophones and marimbas, keyboards, guitars, recorders and penny-whistles.

Preparation

Try to get all the participants and their instruments into a circle. Wheel the piano into the circle. If electric instruments require amplification, ensure that you use extension cables to enable these performers to be in the space.

Arrange chairs in a circle.

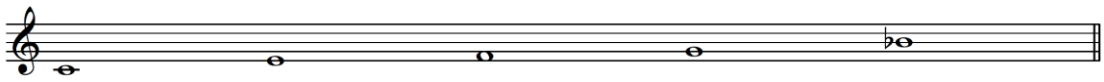
Invite students to become acquainted with a particular series of pitch, such as those within a pentatonic scale. This invitation could function as a “take-home” or homework activity. If they are instrumentally proficient, suggest that they familiarize themselves with the pitch series by playing in several different octaves. For beginners, playing the five pitches in one octave is sufficient. g

Although not essential, ‘Drone-on’ provides a suitable lead into, or partner to, this event. If the same pitch series is chosen, the two events together provide students with an opportunity to explore musical ideas with different rules, techniques, and challenges.

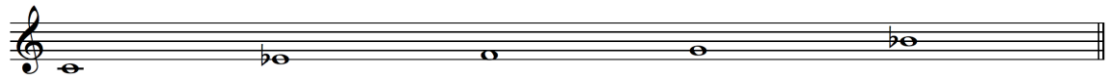
Event

I

Choose an appropriate pentatonic scale. Several examples are provided below, including those referred to as Indian Pentatonic Scale, Minor Pentatonic Scale, and Major Pentatonic Scale.



Indian Pentatonic Scale



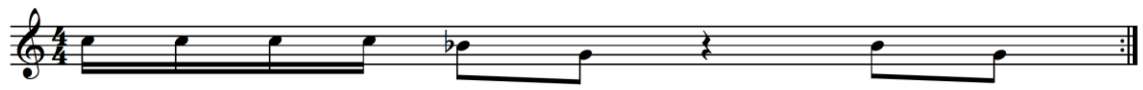
Minor Pentatonic

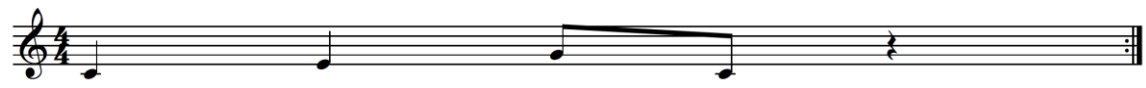
Major Pentatonic

Play (or sing) the selected pitch series slowly in unison. Perform it twice as fast, and then with repetitions of each pitch.

Inform the group that you will be working towards creating a musical mosaic. This group invention will be generated through the use of small musical phrases known as riffs. Explain that each player (and singer) will invent a riff that uses a maximum of just three pitches from the pentatonic pitch set. The riffs will fit a selected tempo, and will be repeated.

Set a clear tempo and initiate the riffing. Moving around the circle each participant joins in one at a time. Importantly, each riff is to be continually repeated as every new player enters. While the first "riffer" is challenged to set the music in motion, every new player should attempt to perform a riff that complements the sounds of the music in motion. Several examples of riffs follow.





Let the riffs breathe, unfolding in their own time, each new riff adding to the texture until yet another complementary riff is performed. In this way, the overall sound will have a chance to establish its character before the next individual offers his or her contribution.

Remind the group that as the musical mosaic grows, each player (or singer) must think, "What does the music need?" "How can I contribute with my riff?"

To finish the event, the first riffer should cease performing. Then, mirroring the order of musical entrances, each group member should exit.

II

Repeat I. Establish a tempo and begin the riffing.

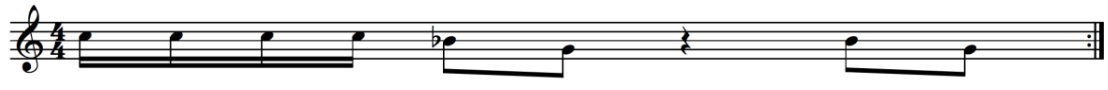
The facilitator can act as a conductor, making musical decisions such as cueing greater and lesser dynamic intensity, and playing with the orchestration, the nature of the musical texture, by cuing in and out group members in their riffing.

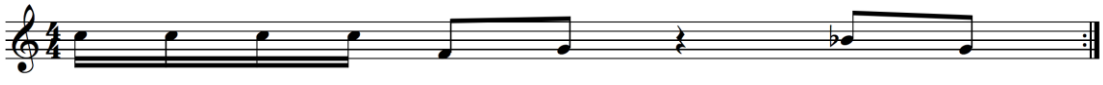
III

Increase the use of pitches, from 3 to 5, in the invention of new riffs.

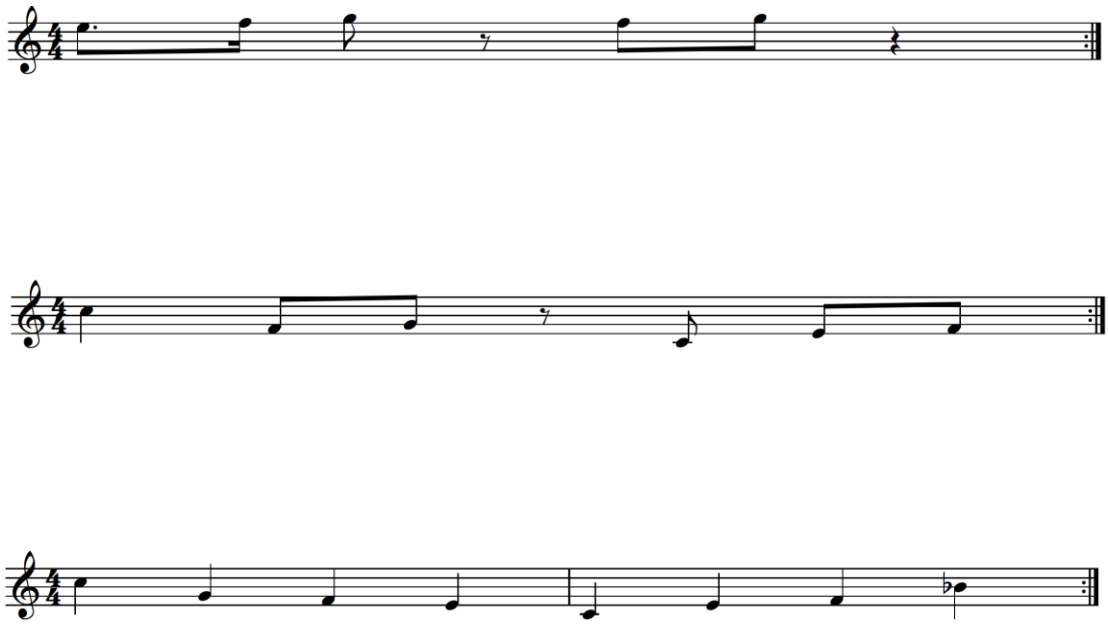
IV

Repeat I, this time with the additional pitches. Once everyone is in with their riff, invite performers to alter their riff—just one pitch at a time. An example of the alteration of a riff follows.





From subtle alteration, group members could be invited to leap to extreme alterations, shifting their initial riff entirely to reflect the changing mood of the overall group sound. In the example that follows, the first riff sounds nothing like the second or third riff, and yet a single performer could conceivably alter riffs to this extent in order to find new complements to the collective.



Discussion

On one hand this event is very simple: Each individual contributes a small musical idea to generate a musical texture of complementary riffs. Group members should reflect on the process of contributing to the musical whole. Recognizing spaces to contribute your musical is a skill to be developed. There are many potential configurations of a few pre-selected pitches, and through the process of doing it, group members should become more equip in answering the questions “What does the music need?” and “How can I contribute?”

Although the overall sound can be likened to “minimalist” compositions such as those from Steve Reich or Philip Glass (and subsequently genres such as Balinese Gamelan, iscathamiya of the South African Zulu, or any number of drumming ensembles out of West Africa), this event can also be easily connected to popular music such as rock, dance, and techno. Encourage the students to find the connections between riff-a-around and the music they know well, ask them to ‘bring-in’ their favourite riffing music, and lead them into further listening to music that relies on riffs that complement one another.

4. Drone-on

Short Description

Exploring intervals between key pitches of a given pitch series provides students with a useful process in the creation of generating new musical ideas. Drone-on uses ideas that are reflective of the Hindustani classical tradition. Here, a perpetual drone provides the tonal foundation for individual musical inventions. By exploring the intervallic relationships inherent with a particular pitch series, students can create individual ideas. The ensemble supports this by playing the drone. There is no need to approach the pitch series in the sense of practicing a scale, which in effect is typical a warm-up to the performance of other music. Rather, the drone and the tonal improvisation that ensues is both the means and the end, and the process by which group members can play together and individually, all within the very same event.

Focus

- *Individual invention*
- *Approaches to learning and thinking about scales*
- *Group dynamics*

Resources

Voices and available melodic instrument: Band and orchestral (wind, brass, and string) instruments, xylophones and marimbas, keyboards, guitars, recorders and penny-whistles. If

percussion instruments are used, these players should still be considered as a soloists within the event.

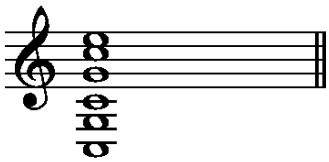
Preparation

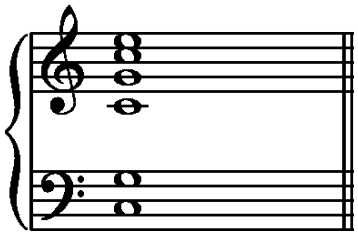
Ensure that students know the pitch series by engaging the group in singing or playing the sequence. This leads to familiarization.

Arrange seating in a circle.

'Riff-a-round' provides a suitable stepping stone for this event. If the same pitch series is chosen for the two events, students are then provided with the opportunity to explore musical ideas within different limits.

The guitar is a prime instrument for producing the drone of the sort called for in this event. In an exploration of alternative guitar tunings, try the open C tuning. Beginning on the highest string, play first-string C (2 steps lower than 6th string E), second-string G (1 steps lower than 5th string A), third-string C (1 steps lower than 4th string D), fourth-string G (as is), fifth-string C (1/2 steps higher than 2nd string B), & sixth-string E (as is). The guitarist can explore the pitches on one or two strings even while playing the drone on the remaining strings. The figure below clarifies the full six pitches on the six strings.

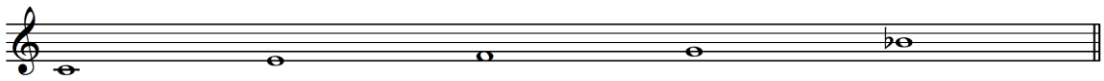




Event

I

Explain to students that each of them will take a solo improvisation using the pitch series they have previously played. An example is this series, the same series that was used in 'Riff a-round', which is sometimes referred to as "the Indian pentatonic": C, E, F, G, B flat.



Begin by establishing the drone. The drone should be the root of the pitch series plus either a fifth or a fourth above the root. Thus, in the key of C, C is the root and either G (the fifth) or F (the fourth) is added. The drone does not set a tempo and may not even be pulsive; the "time" is to be free. As the drone is to support the soloist, it should be played (or sung) in a subtle and light. In Hindustani classical music, the Tampura plays the drone, and while it has a distinctive sound it never overpowers the soloing instruments. Ways to produce the drone include these: Having the keyboard players sound a low root note, adding the guitars on a light drone strum every so often, inviting vocalists to sing root and fifth (or fourth) pitches in a manner that creates a wave-like texture with the rising and falling volumes of crescendos and decrescendos. There are many possibilities for producing the drone. If everyone regardless of instrument or voice, can contribute to the drone, a connected-ness is felt to the making of the overall sound.

Once the drone is established, the solo explorations can begin.
Move into a circle (if that has not been previously established), with the facilitator modelling what the students will do. Allow the model invention, and others that will follow by the students, to proceed slowly. Encourage students to breathe easily and to establish a relationship between one interval and the next. In a C-drone sound, challenge students to see how many melodic ideas they can invent using just the C and E, sustaining, repeating, moving back and forth in various rhythms. Then, add the F to the C and E, and likewise explore melodic ideas featuring just the three pitches. When all five pitches are in play, consider exploring the pitches in another octave.

After the first soloist reaches a resting point, the next soloist can begin.

II

Repeat I. After the final soloist has finished, guide group members into the Riff-a-round event. Without telling them of this development, observe how they respond to a sudden shift from a meditative mood to a moving musical mosaic.

Discussion

Alongside the students spend some time reflecting on the experience of playing and singing the drones and solos. Encourage them to think about what it was it like to be in the music. Discuss the musical possibilities open to singing and playing a limited set of pitches. Introduce students to the Hindustani tradition through listening experiences, for example recordings by Hariprasad Chaurasia (bansuri), Ram Narayan (sarangi), and Ravi Shankar and Anoushka Shankar (sitar). Discuss the similarities and differences between the music of these great Hindustani musicians and these initial experiences in playing inventions atop a drone.

Concluding thoughts

Stressing the importance of establishing an "improvisation culture" Chris Azzara (2002) points towards why improvisation, spontaneity, and interaction should be vital aspects of any music curriculum. From this perspective improvisation becomes not a skill or a cultural practice, but a way of being in and through music, one where teachers and students embark on journeys of musical discovery together. Roger Mantie and I describe this as improvisation as experience, rather than ability or culture (Higgins & Mantie, 2013). In supporting this notion, Vijay Iyer (Miller & Iyer, 2010) have suggested that life itself is improvisatory. They remark that in nature, there is really "no difference between human experience and the act of improvisation." Similarly, George Lewis (2009) calls improvisation a "practice of thinking" and "a ubiquitous method of meaning exchange in any everyday life interaction." Human existence, he suggests, is "the condition of improvisation." If we employ the term *musicking,* one of Christopher Small's (1998) significant contributions, improvisation can be understood to evokes the anthropological argument that locates the human potential of music making. One might say the capacity to participate in the socially interactive process of

making music. From this foundational understanding music-making might be understood as "a trail of no mistakes," becoming instead a celebration of the many and varied musical pathways that both teacher and student can take.

Through the practical activities presented in this paper there is an offering toward an emphasis on self-expression and reflective practice for music educator and the participants they work with. When Patricia Campbell and myself wrote *Free to be Musical* we wanted to encourage teachers (and all music makers) to ask their own questions and through doing so, to connect their musical experiences with the lives they are leading in the surrounding musical world. We wanted to encourage teachers to be musical, and to join *with* their students in crafting collective yet also personally fulfilling music. Even as we ourselves are singers, dancers, and players of music, we uphold the belief that the integration of music and movement are critical in the artistic expressions we facilitate for others. We fully expect that teachers will shape experiences that will suit their students, their spaces, their schedules, and their own priorities, and thus we did not arranged the events nor definitively set them for a particular age or developmental stage. We thought the teacher was best to judge what will work for which setting of students, and do not want to limit the use of our events to specific contexts. My hope is that by injecting classrooms with events that embrace artistic-expressive thinking and embodied doing, those engaged in music education will embark on a musical voyage of life-long musical learning.

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