

workshop



Elementary improvisation, score-marking, percussion repair secrets, and more



GENERAL MUSIC

Elementary Improvisation

Being so closely associated with jazz, improvisation is often regarded as a skill reserved for more initiated students. But as Heather Shouldice, an instructor of early childhood music at the Michigan State University Community Music School in East Lansing, has found, even the very youngest students have all they need in order to improvise. "Children can begin improvising as soon as they can sing, chant, and move to music!" says Shouldice.

"Many believe that improvisation must wait until after students have an understanding of music notation and music theory, but this is false," she continues. "In fact, it is vital that children begin improvising before they learn music notation so that they understand that music doesn't have to come from the page; they are capable of deciding how music should go. It might not sound great at first, but the more experience children have with improvising, the more comfortable they will feel and the better they will get."

In teaching improvisation to the youngest students, Shouldice finds it best to have them begin improvising not on instruments but vocally. She also believes that just as children learn words before they begin to hold spontaneous conversations, they ought to be taught short

melodic patterns, outlining tonic and dominant ideas in major and minor keys, as well as simple rhythmic patterns in duple and triple meters for use as building blocks in improvisation. "If you want to take it up a notch for older students, add tonal and/or rhythm solfège and begin labeling function so that students understand harmonic function and have the vocabulary to talk about it, which will help them improvise over it," she says.

Slightly older students are often directed to use a minor pentatonic scale when improvising. However, Shouldice



thinks that kids shouldn't be restricted to just those five notes, and in fact should be placed in situations where they need to choose between using a natural minor or major scale. "Having students take a stab at improvising in major and minor will help them learn to hear within a tonal context," she says. "Again, it might not sound terrific at first, but this is how students will develop a sense of what sounds good in

their improvisations."

Improvising can be scary for students at any level, and Shouldice suggests depicting it as a fun, game-like activity so it doesn't occur to the kids to be nervous. To further remove any stress, she recommends arranging the students in a circle when improvising, promoting a sense of togetherness that is reinforced by having the group improvise collectively at times. Another strategy she finds effective is somewhat less conventional: "Model improvising and making mistakes yourself! If the students see that the teacher is not afraid to take risks and make mistakes, they won't be either!" —Adam Perlmutter



BRASS AND WOODWINDS

A Rough Guide to Score-Marking

The process of studying musical scores is often unique to each conductor, and there are many benefits that can come from developing and using a specific system for marking. When used properly, score-marking can help your ensemble as well. We spoke with Thomas Bough, director of athletic bands at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, to get his insights on how the systematic marking of scores can lead to better comprehension and performance.

Bough has a very specific set of goals

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HEATHER SHOULDICE



when marking scores and teaching the process to his students. “I want my kids to learn to make musical decisions. I want them to think about things like ‘How important is my part?’ and ‘Where do I fit in the big picture?’ The goal is to equip players with the ability to make those decisions, to know where their part fits in the musical hierarchy and, in the process, to make it more fun for them.” To accomplish these things, Bough uses a five-color system for marking his scores. Using high-quality colored pencils, he marks tempo and dynamic changes in red, the melody in blue, and any countermelody in green. Any important bass motions are marked in brown, while any places where the percussion parts mimic or outline other melodic lines are marked in orange.

Bough also has his students mark their parts in a manner similar to his own markings. He suggests having them mark places where they should play out a bit more, such as when they are playing the melody, or where they should lay back if they aren’t. He also has students mark what other sections or individuals are playing so that they begin to know where their part fits within the music.

Bough believes that marking scores and score-study in general can have a significant impact on an ensemble’s performance. “When you take the time to mark your scores, you can be much more efficient in rehearsal. It shows that you are prepared.” Knowing your score allows you to better explain the “why” behind your requests rather than making them seem like arbitrary decisions made by the conductor. Bough does all of these things with the intent that, with any given piece

of music, he can confidently say, “This part is structurally important; Here is why, and here is how I would like you to play because of it.”

While score-study and marking are rarely seen as some of the highlights of our craft, they are still an important and essential part of the music-making process.

Using a specific system of marking scores for musical relevance may help you and your students to move to a higher level of musical performance and understanding.

—Chad Criswell



Do High School Orchestras Have Too Much Rehearsal Time?

How much time should be spent prepping for performance? When should you stop rehearsing for performance and turn to other exercises? Sarah Djordjevic, orchestra teacher at Maine East High School in Park Ridge, Illinois, weighs in on how string teachers can maximize rehearsal time.

Djordjevic points out that “Performance is, in most cases, what motivates our students to learn and grow as musicians. I know that it is why my students have chosen to take orchestra in high school.” So, how to balance the need to prepare for performance with the need for students to learn and experiment in a non-performance-focused setting as well? Says Djordjevic, “Rehearsal is detrimental when it is just repetition. It is important to teach students that in rehearsal we are always making changes, experimenting and improving our work. I believe that good planning and multiple teaching strategies can help make rehearsal into a solid learning practice.”

Djordjevic provides some ideas for teachers to make the most of rehearsal time: “Start every day with a solid warm-up. My orchestra does scales,

rhythms, shifting exercises, sight-reading and posture review.” This routine will ensure that students see the smaller steps that go into successful playing and performance.

Even when performance is the end result, the teacher should be using the rehearsal of the piece to focus upon specific skills. “Select music that teaches your goal. If you want to work on vibrato, select a piece that is perfect for that and make sure you tell your students that is the purpose. Focus the entire group on setting and reaching goals.”

Djordjevic also advocates using smaller-group work as a way of helping students to rehearse while also enforcing skills. “Chamber groups where students



practice their orchestra music encourage individual accountability, discussion, and conversation about music and performance.” Varying rehearsal time helps to avoid the mere repetition of music for performance. “Use brain-based teaching methods to connect student learning and structure activities for maximum retention and learning. Incorporate multisensory instruction, chunking, distributed practice, visual organizers, imagery, humor, and emotion into lessons.”

Technology is a great way for teachers to maximize class time and even “extend student learning beyond the limits of rehearsal time.” Djordjevic uses audio and video recordings along with YouTube and SmartMusic to keep students thinking