



## IMPROVISATION: A RESOURCE FOR ALL PIANISTS

Consider focusing on improvisation with your pupils, says **John Riley**: it's an effective way to encourage freedom, independence and confidence, and a useful transferable skill

**M**ention 'piano improvisation', and what comes to mind? A well-developed art, but just for jazz musicians? Or perhaps one that is all-too-synonymous with somewhat ephemeral background music or anonymous, wandering – even cathartic – creations, which often fail to totally engage?

All perceptions apart, surely keyboard improvisation is a skill for 'classical'

pianists to fully embrace, and apply ambition. In this briefest of outlines, I aim to suggest a few possible pointers to how improvisation is not only a valuable creative tool, but also one that feeds directly into wider aspects of music, such as composition, keyboard harmony, aural training and analysis, and most particularly musical memory – the musical ear. I also hope to show how

“ A CONCEPT OF STYLE, MOOD AND CHARACTER MUST BE ENCOURAGED FROM THE OUTSET ”

improvisation should aim to incorporate many of the disciplines and expectations of composition – improvising being, essentially, composition speeded up. This discussion will focus on piano, though many of the principles can equally transfer to other keyboard instruments.

Although improvising can be a daunting prospect for even experienced musicians, framing the task in terms of realistic goals can enable students of all levels to produce something of genuine musical worth, and provide encouragements to develop skills further.

Rather than being faced with a blank canvas, a student can often benefit from a combination of given stimuli

and parameters, notably those of length and complexity. For example: only eight bars with slightly varied repetitions; adopting a fixed drone bass rather than moving chords; limiting notes to the Dorian or pentatonic modes rather than modulating through diatonic keys. Even within such modes lie many harmonic resources, and without the added complexities and shifting hand positions of diatonic harmony. Rhythmic frameworks can be provided through word or sentence patterns, even a short metrical poem or hymn verse. The patterns of repeated lines could even guide the thematic structure.

### STYLE EXAMPLES

A concept of style, mood and character must be encouraged from the outset, as defined for example by the speed of pulse and type of rhythm; and also the type of mode or modes, or the harmonic style within a diatonic framework. For example, the use of the black-note pentatonic mode could invite associations with some Asian, Scottish or Irish traditions, or a five-note compass using the Lydian mode – with its pronounced augmented 4th – might lend itself to a Hungarian-style dance movement.

It is also crucial to be able to shape melody and harmonic movement around the pulse and metre. A useful task might be to create a melody built above an ostinato bass line (perhaps provided

by the teacher), which could also invite discussion on relative note values and rhythmic shape. Harmonic direction and structure are also fundamental to cogency within an improvisation or composition, and it is important to be able to feel the underlying harmonies and broader harmonic direction within melodic phrases and different figurations, such as arpeggios and leaping chords: for example through a classical style improvisation using a given chord pattern of I IV V7 chords, or even just the I and V bass notes. Adding more passing notes and accented dissonance to the same or a similar pattern could create a style more reminiscent of the Romantic era.

### SIMPLE SATISFACTION

Even relatively unsophisticated material that is well structured can be relatively satisfying: for example, a stepwise melody and series of note clusters on the pentatonic scale, creating a clear A-B-A form.

Using repeated material can be both economical and an aid to musical structure. This also helps develop memory and how to make slight but meaningful variations within repetitions. For example, a short folk dance like melody with an A-A-B-A phrase structure is likely to be far more satisfying than a long string of unconnected phrases.

- We can perhaps summarise these guidelines with four sibilant suggestions:
- » Simplicity – reducing the demands of memory and processing power, as well as multiplicity of choices and decisions to be made
  - » Sifting – through structured tasks or free exploration, separating the more worthwhile material from the padding. It is also far easier to refine and perfect a small area such as a 12 bar melody and bass, than a sprawling mass of texture
  - » Structure – the sense of purpose and direction with a clear beginning and end, rather than travelling aimlessly in the hope that this will eventually emerge
  - » Style – an identifiable personality and mood from the outset.

John Riley: 'Improvisation can be a daunting prospect for even experienced musicians'



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To these we can add these three practice pointers:

- » Pulse, (and usually metre) – without which even the most sublime melody and harmony will be undermined
- » Performance and Precision – tidy and confident playing will enhance the improvisation no less than it does in performing the written repertoire.

Less is therefore often more, and with reduced congestion of thought and greater transparency of sound and structure, everything is easier to chart and control: intuition and creativity can breathe and develop more easily. Improvising becomes less of a byword for the ephemeral or experimental, and more towards music of stature and a finished product.

As with a good speech, an improvisation should:

- » Grab and entice the listener's ear from the outset
- » Retain the listener's interest as it develops various ideas
- » End conclusively
- » Leave a memory of something of meaning and worth.

Consider therefore making focused improvisation tasks a regular part of a music lesson, or even a focus of study in its own right. The immediacy of the musical result and the sense of freedom, independence and confidence that improvising can bring for the student make it a very worthwhile and thoroughly transferrable skill to acquire. ■

John Riley is an Edinburgh-based freelance musician, increasingly well known as a teacher and performer of keyboard improvisation. He has led various workshops and contributed to a number of music journals. Further examples and resources can be found on his website at [www.organimprovisation.net](http://www.organimprovisation.net)