

What is musical improvisation and why should we do it?



Louise Gibbs

Contact: louise@jazzmine.co.uk

WHAT IS IMPROVISATION?

Very simply, musical improvisation is composing as you perform: a kind of making up music as you go along. This doesn't mean that improvised music is magic or meaningless or that it requires some special gift to improvise. Anyone can improvise and it is something we do naturally (if we allow ourselves), and can easily learn.

We improvise conversations everyday. But before we can improvise a conversation we learn by imitating a language – which starts from the time we are born (and researchers say even before). We start by being with, listening to and imitating the sounds and sound patterns of our 'expert' parent speakers to gradually acquire our 'mother-tongue' language and its meaning. Through imitation, practice, correction, trial and error we become increasingly competent at understanding meaning, speaking and communicating with other language users. We even learn to write and compose language, and we can also learn another language at any time in our life.

So it is with musical improvisation. The main point is that we learn to improvise inside the musical 'language' or idiom that we best know. It's possible to improvise within any style of music: classical, popular, folk, and with jazz, it's expected as it once was with classical music. Once we know the basic features, phrases and structures of a musical idiom (and can express them vocally or on an instrument) we can modify them – at first by experimentation and then by design and purpose.

WHY SHOULD WE IMPROVISE?

Improvisation is the starting point for any music making and is often the basis of composing music. Very young children improvise without self-consciousness and that capacity for spontaneous expression and delight is what every sophisticated artist aspires to. We can all discover that satisfaction for ourselves at any level of music making.

HOW DO I LEARN TO IMPROVISE?

My own approach to teaching music and improvisation is to provide:

- practical skills for managing an instrument (voice and/or keyboard)
- musical repertoire which incorporates the musical elements of rhythms, melodies, harmonies, and structures – specifically in jazz and classical idioms
- encouragement for you to adopt an 'experimental attitude' towards playing with musical elements and a constructively critical attitude to yourself
- encouragement and opportunities to play and learn with others
- practical strategies to re-form and compose musical elements into something new
- practical strategies to perform with and in front of others confidently
- practical strategies to improve your practising and studying
- strategies and frameworks to help you evaluate your musical efforts and results