

**"Playgroup: Using Structured Group-Improvisation Exercises to Train the Ear, Improve Ensemble Playing, and Develop a Collective Sonic Vocabulary"**

By: Jeremy Udden

"New York is one-rehearsal town."

This is a common sentiment among professional improvising musicians in the jazz, "creative music," modern classical, folk, and world music genres. Public performances can be sparse at times and musicians play in many ensembles, so a typical scenario involves a concert booked and a single rehearsal to prepare the repertoire. The leader hires expert instrumentalists to read and rehearse the written portions of the material. The improvisation or "solo" sections are typically skimmed over during rehearsal, often in an effort to allow the music to be as spontaneous as possible during the actual performance. The finished product is often fully realized for the first time at the concert, in real time for the audience and musicians simultaneously.

I have been a part of this scenario hundreds of times, yet I continue to be surprised and amazed that it actually works. A musical scaffold is created during rehearsal, while the actual building is constructed before the eyes of the audience. Success, however, depends on the quality of the musicians who are hired in the first place, particularly in situations where the notated music offers little guidance. If an intermediate musician were to be hired they *might* reach the same level of performance as a "professional" level player, but they would require more rehearsal time and/or verbal guidance from the composer or leader. A less experienced player would neither have the trained ears, nor the melodic or harmonic vocabulary to contribute to the musical conversation on the required level. This is particularly true in music that asks the entire ensemble to improvise collectively for any length of time. Often in jazz or "bluegrass" music, for example, the entire band might simultaneously improvise using a chord structure that gives form to the music. Basic structures like melody and solo order happen spontaneously, though are based on prior knowledge of the fundamental aspects of the genre.

The professional is hired because of an assumed skill set, which they have reached on their own as a result of individual practice and previous performance experience. They arrive at a rehearsal and use their expertise to navigate the written and improvised sections of the music. On occasion there might be no rehearsal at all, so a musician would arrive to a public performance having not previously seen the music. Relying on their ability to "sight-read," the musician executes the equivalent of an actor both reading and performing a play for the very first time, with no rehearsal, as the audience watches. Yet, in this scenario, the actor would also need to serve as playwright during short sections as well!

Assuming that these resulting performances are an artistic success, how does a musician reach the required level of expertise to be invited to such a situation in the first place? I mentioned the necessity of "practice" and "previous experience."

Literature on the practice of executing musical notation and phrasing is widely available, as are methods of improving tone, intonation and finger technique. While there are, of course, disparate schools of thought and very strict schools of playing (German versus French saxophone technique for example), proper guidance from a master musician combined with the adage, "Repetition is the mother of all learning" is the most common path in striving for these skills.

The structured practice of improvisation over a chord structure, however, is a younger pedagogical pursuit, represented by a mere fifty to one hundred years of discordant teaching approaches. That said, the pedagogy typically involves some type of training the ear to hear intervals and chord qualities, while developing an executable rhythmic and melodic vocabulary based on knowledge of scales and chords. The desired result is that the improviser can spontaneously compose and execute melodies based on the chords and in reaction to any rhythmic, harmonic, or melodic information that might be played by the other musicians in the group. Of course this is a gross oversimplification of a process to which many, including myself, have devoted their entire lives.

I subscribe to two key principles in my own practice of improvisation. First, to "practice" something - a concept, rhythm, or piece of vocabulary - should look as close to the actual act of improvising as possible, if it is ever to appear in a later improvisation. As Stephen Nachmanovitch states in his book *Free Play*, "When we explode the artificial categories of *exercise* and *real music*, each tone we play is at once an exploration of technique and a full expression of spirit" (68). Ideally we "practice" a new harmonic or rhythmic device or concept within some type of structured improvisation. I typically tell my students that it is like using a vocabulary word in a sentence, or forcibly placing a new word in as many verbal scenarios as possible throughout the day. With this method the word is much more likely to be internalized and used in the long run, rather than by rote memorization of a definition. So it is not enough to practice one's mixolydian scale, *then* improvise, for example. The student needs to work with the scale by contextualizing it. They need to mix up the order or rhythm and be as playful as possible. They need to place it within various sets of harmonic structures if they are ever to feel comfortable spontaneously composing with a given device in the heat of a performance with other musicians.

The second principle can be described using the baseball metaphor of "swinging a weighted bat." Many of the exercises I have created for my students involve some form of improvising within a given set of parameters, and using one's creativity to make it interesting. The more specifically you hold yourself to the limits, the more difficult it will be, but the more you will be forced to flex your creative muscles. However, once you allow yourself to "swing away" - or take the doughnut off of the bat, the feeling of freedom is liberating and the concept is likely internalized. This method trains the ear by isolating and exploring a specific melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic device. It also adheres to the first principle by keeping this exploration within the context of actual improvising.

"Previous experience" is a bit more allusive, and I would argue that the type of experience needed beyond the practice room is getting harder to come by as the years pass. The earliest jazz improvisers often had the luxury of nightly work in a dance band. They could practice something new all afternoon and test it in a live situation that evening, with the added benefit of social pressure. Jazz is a social music and it is designed to be played with people. Improvisational skills need to be executed immediately in reaction to the chords and rhythms being played by other members of a group. The actual performance, then, doubles as the necessary practice one needs in order to internalize the language fully. Similarly, a person learning French cannot do so by reading books and speaking alone. To be fluent they must converse with others, testing their ability to call on new vocabulary in response to their surroundings.

To complicate things further, jazz musicians are notoriously coy about discussing the intricacies of group performance and improvisation, outside the context of an actual lesson with a teacher. As paraphrased by saxophonist Lee Konitz, when asked to discuss a recent performance on a radio broadcast, tenor saxophonist Lester Young supposedly replied, "Sorry Pres, I never discuss my sex life in public." (Konitz). Regardless of the authenticity of this quote, it speaks to the conceptual influence that Young had on generations to follow, including that of Mr. Konitz. Miles Davis, too, was famously cryptic to his sidemen, once advising a rhythm section player "Don't play what's there, play what's not there" (Carr, 247). So it has long been considered "unhip" to ask a fellow musician on the bandstand anything literal such as, "What chord was that?" or "When you play that way, what should I do?" I believe that this was less of a disadvantage to older generations, because they were actually working on the bandstand every night and therefore afforded the time to answer many of these questions on their own in the heat of performance. Today's musicians, however, are not always lucky enough to have this consistent experience.

It was within this atmosphere that I first met trumpeter John McNeil, who was very much a product of the older generation, having gained formidable performance experience with Horace Silver, Gerry Mulligan, and Thad Jones. After acting as a substitute in John's quartet on a concert in New York, he asked if I would come to his house so we could practice together. We began by playing duets, often improvising counterpoint together over jazz standards. The huge revelation for me was that John enjoyed engaging in more specific conversations about improvisation. We started experimenting together and asking very literal musical questions - "What if I play *this* while you are playing *that*?" Duo rehearsals soon turned into quartet sessions as we added bass and drums, and eventually a working band called *Hushpoint* was formed. *Hushpoint* rehearsals are completely unique to any group I have been a part of. We experiment. We try new things - switching up roles. We have created improvisational games and exercises based on our own individual practice routines, and we found ways to apply them to the group, gaining deeper honesty and understanding.

In essence, we began to speed up our acquisition of "experience" by taking time to discuss the intricacies of jazz performance and group improvisation in a very specific way. This type of talk - in a post Miles Davis, Lester Young jazz world - is extremely uncommon because it makes each player extremely vulnerable. Improvisers are trained to take risks and sound their best, but that can also lead to players hiding their weaknesses. This can hinder the learning process because actual inadequacies in one's playing are not immediately addressed.

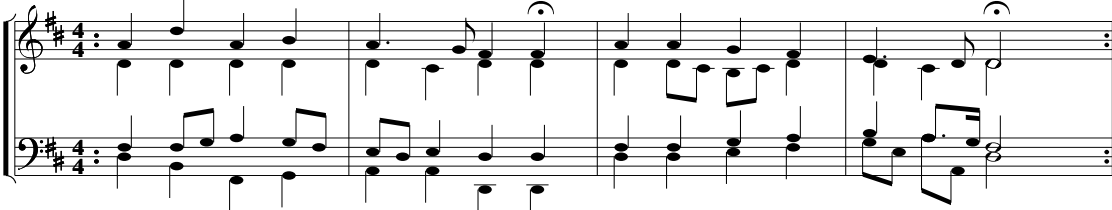
Essentially what these exercises provide is a group version of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as a *Flow* state. The exercises provide a "clear set of goals that require appropriate responses," (Csikszentmihalyi, 29) with opportunity for feedback as well. More importantly, the "flow experience acts as a magnet for learning - that is for developing new levels of challenges and skills. In an ideal situation, a person would be constantly growing while enjoying whatever he or she did." (Csikszentmihalyi, 33) I tend to refer to these "exercises" as "games," because the group work lends itself to more engagement and fun as we lose track of time, which are also key characteristics of a *flow*.

Below are examples of three exercises that first came from my own practicing or teaching, and were then adapted to *Hushpoint*. Having tested these while teaching intermediate jazz ensembles, I continue to be impressed with the flexibility of having multiple entry points in terms of a player's ability. While some exercises are harmonically or rhythmically specific, others are more conceptual. All three exercises follow the principles of keeping as close as possible to the act of improvising, as well as "swinging a weighted bat" in an effort to exercise creative muscles.

### **Exercise 1: Improvising Chorales**

Bach chorales are often used as exemplars of perfect counterpoint. There is an inarguably satisfying gravity to the way the rhythm and harmony align.

**BWV 262**      Alle menschen müssen sterben



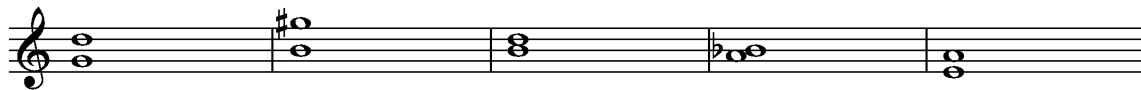
The image shows the first four measures of the chorale "Alle menschen müssen sterben" by Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 262. The music is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The score is presented in a grand staff with a treble clef on the top staff and a bass clef on the bottom staff. The melody in the treble clef consists of quarter notes and half notes, with a final half note in the fourth measure. The bass line provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

On one occasion I invited two former students over to play, and we began improvising freely as three saxophones. Perhaps because I hadn't seen these two talented players in a while, I had trouble disengaging my pedagogical mind. While improvising freely, we fell into an almost "choral-like" piece, and I suggested we try putting a parameter on ourselves to improvise more specifically in the style of Bach.

We attempted to emulate his rhythm and phrasing, while keeping our ears wide open for natural harmonic cadences. The results were magic!

Thinking about this occasion more, I tried simpler version of the exercise on other sessions, and with a few beginning student groups as well. As it turns out, this method serves as a great "first day" exercise for student ensembles. Here's how it works:

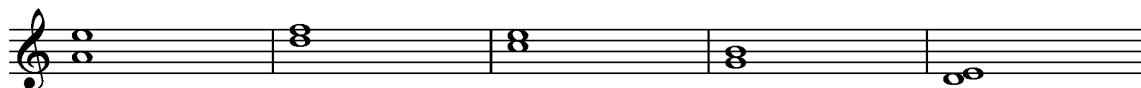
With two musicians, put a metronome on at 60 beats per minute, and simply play whole notes of your choosing, simultaneously, starting on beat one of every measure. An improvisation might look and sound something like this:



Notice that the resulting piece consists of a set of intervals in time. Already this is a useful exercise, allowing students to work on intonation and sound quality, as well as recognition of intervals.

**It is also a great first step for novice improvisers, because you have taken rhythm out of the equation completely; the musician only needs to choose a new note every four bars.**

Next, pick a key center, perhaps "C Major" first. Do the same exercise, but stick exactly to the key of C. It might look/sound like this:



Notice that more recognizable harmony begins to take shape. Intonation and sound are still addressed. You could even say that "change playing" begins to happen (if that is an end goal), because you have added the parameter of sticking to a single mode or key. This is still easy, because the improviser does not yet need to worry about rhythm. I would also argue that the ear tends to feel the **gravity** of the harmonic movement, and the player begins attempting to anticipate the next move of his playing partner, which might result in a more or less consonant interval. In addition to developing the ear, the player is developing his/her harmonic instinct.

With three musicians, the first exercise might look like this:



And with three musicians, the second exercise might look like this:



Obviously, the more musicians, the thicker the chords can be. There is a greater chance of dissonance, but a greater reward when consonance happens (if that is your goal). Of course, unisons will happen as well. This exercise offers hours of reward, as there always seem to be magical moments of tension and resolution. Begin adding dynamics, and end each phrase when your instinct tells you to do so.

From here, the exercise can go in a few possible directions. One is to simply increase the tempo, for example by five beats per minute per rendition. This can be very helpful to first-time improvisers, as it still keeps rhythm out of the equation, yet allows them to choose a new note at faster and faster tempos. Again, each player is developing their ears and instinct to shape these notes into a piece of music.

Another direction is to begin adding to your rhythmic currency, first by allowing the occasional half note. After that is comfortable, allow for the occasional quarter note, and so on. The goal is to reach a point where the ensemble is emulating the style of a Bach choral, either in a specific key, or with no harmony at all.

I guarantee you that every time you do this it will sound different. More profoundly, you will have created music that has literally never been played before. This is a great way to get everyone's sound, ears, and improvising mind working. You are simultaneously working on group dynamic, training your ears, and developing your musical instincts.

Those interested in composition might consider recording these exercises as a group, then actually transcribing the music. I guarantee you will arrive at chordal voicings that you would never have considered otherwise.