

## “Extemporaneous Zones”

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The last twenty years have brought about an amazing array of mixing styles of music, most notably with classical music institutions (orchestras, soloists) and improvisers. Examples of these collaborations include pianist Joanna MacGregor with eclectic jazz composer Django Bates and composer Marc Anthony-Turnage with American jazzers Peter Erskine and John Scofield. British composer Colin Riley and eminent jazz saxophonist/composer Tim Whitehead and their ensemble the Homemade Orchestra are another example of this very contemporary phenomenon. These collaborations have brought about a hybrid music of its own, helping to redefine stylistic boundaries, as well as to appeal to previously different audiences concurrently. Fusions of this sort are not entirely new though, as starting in 1974, jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli and virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin recorded a string of six “jazz” albums for the EMI label. Many listeners may have thought that Menuhin’s solos were improvised, when in fact, they were carefully written out by the arranger and musical director, Max Harris.

Improvisation will now be a subject for assessment by the Associated Boards for the Royal Schools of Music Grade Exams, which in classical terms, have been around for over 100 years. Jazz Piano Grades 1-5 have been available since 1999 and the same for clarinet, saxophone, trumpet and trombone will commence from June 2003. Does this mean that more classically-trained musicians will be pursuing, if not taking an interest in improvising? Probably so, and to follow are some of the difficulties they may encounter that I have observed, having taught them for the past twenty years.

**Classical Constrictions** - Ways in which classical musicians approach learning to improvise, and the challenges therein.

There are many differences in the way classically-trained musicians learn their craft, as well as practise, perform and interact musically with others. Therefore, they often experience problems in adapting to the new and different settings that improvised musics offer. In this section, I will point out these key differences, and attempt to come up with solutions and exercises that help to enable classically-trained players to feel more comfortable in these new settings. The main areas of examination are in practising/preparation methods, disparity of musical styles and the different parameters and expectations given in musical interaction with other musicians. I firmly hold that the discipline, talent and perseverance that enables musicians to progress in one style, can be effectively transferred to another, i.e. a reasonably accomplished classical musician can develop respectable improvisation skills, if introduced to it in the right way.

It should also be mentioned that there are many similarities between the way classical musicians and improvisers develop skills and pursue their respective goals. One strong indicator of this is the fact that qualifications in Jazz, Popular and World musics (all of which utilise and include improvisation extensively) are offered alongside those for classical musicians at universities and conservatories (music colleges) throughout the UK. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that the instrumental and vocal training/skills required for becoming an adept improviser are just as demanding as that of a classical performer. In addition, improvised music, in many cases, can be documented, researched and studied just as assiduously as classical music, from both and a technical/analytical standpoint as well historical perspective. These aspects are clearly the stuff of scholarly institutions, which allow for both subjects to be taught, studied and examined, side by side.

The following are general areas that possibly bring about difficulties and challenges for the classically-trained musician learning to improvise.

- Too many new things at once
- Sounding “good”
- Starting from “Scratch”
- Learning and registering the forms of songs/tunes
- Group interaction issues
  - a. Unusual and odd group settings

- b. New set of “structural signposts”
- c. Differing cultural and educational backgrounds of participating musicians

- Taught largely through written materials

### Too many new things at once

Improvisation may often introduce too many new concepts and challenges at once to a student. They can include the following four areas:

- Learning of new technical, scalar and chordal information, specific to the music to be improvised over.
- Embracing of new rhythmical and stylistic concepts.
- Acquiring knowledge, familiarity of and exposure to new musical idioms.
- Playing and interacting with new and different musicians on a regular and intimate basis.

While one or two of these areas might offer one a gritty challenge, the combination of several at once can suitably daunt a newcomer. These distinct new disciplines are not necessarily closely linked to the skills they have developed as a classical musician. As a result, they are more feasible to tackle individually, as opposed to concurrently. The problem being that they are all essential areas that require being addressed equally in order to embrace improvisation.

### Sounding “Good”

Classical musicians are often trained to sound “good” (as in refined or polished) when performing. While most improvisers also strive to sound good, it is not always guaranteed, especially in a learning/workshop context. The assiduous and perfecting type of practice that a classical performer will go through to prepare a piece is a considerably different process to that of an improviser learning a given tune or musical framework for an improvisational setting. Most classical performances do not include or encourage chance or individual creativity in the same way that improvisation does. Those factors are often the province of the conductor and/or the composer’s artistic licence. Because of this, many musicians with classical backgrounds may feel exposed and self-conscious while attempting to improvise, especially in front of their peers or an audience.

### Starting from “Scratch”

The idea that an accomplished classical player would have to go back to basics to embrace another style, does not sit well with some. It can seem humiliating and feel as though one is working backwards. One noted difference is how one learns scales/arpeggios other and chordal materials. Many classical musicians will initially read the scales and eventually memorise them, using the tactile feel of the scales/arpeggios on their instrument as a means of retention. Improvisers on the other hand, often memorise material by the way it might relate to a given key centre or harmonic area. The reasons being that they wish to train their minds to think that way, as well as relating musical material to harmonic areas to develop improvisations from. Another area that might grate is repertoire. A musician who is used to performing Grade 8 or higher level repertoire to be suddenly be presented with basic blues or riff themes, might question the validity of what might seem to be such elemental material. The simplistic nature of these themes, of course, is to (eventually) inspire and develop improvisational ideas, and not to be treated as the sole source of thematic material. While this might become evident in time, it can be difficult to convince the student at the outset, that these simplistic themes are worthwhile.

### Learning and “internalising” song forms

Students and listeners alike, often ask me as to how I am able to “keep my place in the form” which is to implicitly know where the beginning, middle and end of any piece, while it is going by. An internal command of the song form is necessary for any improviser, as it will guide and give them a sense of where their improvisation is going. Many musicians, while being expected to know this (their place in the form), will often rely on a conductor to bring them in at a key juncture in the piece, song or tune. An example being, letter B, which is the beginning of the second full chorus of the song. This ability is especially difficult in the case of an improvisation vehicle (song or tune) that has a particularly long (more than a standard 32-bar form) or an unusual or uneven number of bars. While developing this skill may seem daunting at first, it is one that can be relatively easily learned and become second nature.

### Group Interaction Issues

Many classically-trained musicians might find themselves interacting with a diversity of players when put in improvising situations. This factor can affect the way they work together, in many ways, some of which better than others. Success in improvisation is contingent just as much on group interaction skills as it is on individual musicianship, instrumental technique and command of the idiom. If one's experience has largely been in solo or duo settings, as is often the case with recitalists and accompanists, interacting with other players in an ensemble for improvisation can bring about new challenges. Some jazz groups or "combos" for example, can be comprised of diverse instrumentations that might be completely new and strange to the classical player. The acoustical settings of a group might take some getting used to, like the case of a violinist or flautist who has never played with a kit drummer or electric guitarist before, for example.

In addition, improvised settings often have a different set of pre-ordained "structural signposts" that help to guide the player through the piece. They include:

- Delineating between written and improvised sections of a piece, as well as combining the two concurrently.
- Coping with the ever-changing and flexible lengths of pieces, depending on how extensive the improvised sections might be.
- Realising and maximising (even if it means playing less) one's role in a group (interactive) improvisation exercise.

Another factor that can affect group dynamics is interacting with musicians from different social, educational and economic backgrounds. While this aspect may seem unrelated, it can influence the quality of communication and degree of comfort of players relating to each other in this new group situation. Improvisation can often require more discussion and intimate social interaction than that of classical music. Most of the verbal communication will be filtered through the conductor (because of his/her central role in an ensemble) in classical music, whereas improvised music can require a more direct player-to-player approach. For example- if the saxophone player wishes for his solo to be accompanied by bass only, it will often be up to him or her to speak to, or visually signal the pianist and drummer to tacet (not play). This situation in classical music would most likely be dictated by the conductor and would not require direct contact between the players themselves. Cultivating the ease and confidence to do this freely is a process that does not happen overnight. It often requires the players getting to know and relate to each other personally as well as musically. This factor often enables players to see their personal and musical interaction as one congruent and unified whole. This is not immediately likely however, if players from diverse backgrounds and musical training/skills find themselves placed in the same group. It may take weeks or months of getting familiar with one another before the level of communication and familiarity with each other allows for creating mutual pathways of improvisational harmony together.

### Taught largely through written materials

One important link between jazz and classical musicians is that they tend to initially learn from books, or written material. These may include instrumental/vocal method tutors as well as books containing scalar and harmonic information and repertoire. This literacy-based style of learning is one of the reasons that that more and more jazz qualifications are offered alongside existing classical ones at music colleges and universities in the UK. While it is important for the student to have developed a reasonable instrumental technique before embarking on improvisation, too many educators overly emphasise method books at the crucial, early stages of improvisation. Using books will not hamper some learners, as they might already have an idea of what they are after, having listened to and/or studied improvisation previously. With others though, the words do get in the way as they spend too much time and energy reading and trying to understand what is written, to the detriment of making music spontaneously. Many improvisation concepts and challenges are not easily explainable by written means. Playing by ear and attempting to feel and grasp the rhythmic pulse of the piece is an important starting point from which an improvisation can be generated. This is especially the case for a beginner who is disoriented enough, looking for handholds to provide guidance in this challenging new musical area.

These aforementioned areas are but a few of the many challenges faced by classically-trained musicians embarking on improvisation. While overcoming them might initially seem daunting, the gradual process of becoming familiar with them will help to build confidence and make the prospect of improvising much more of a reality-and an enjoyable one too!