

Teaching Improvisation in UK Music Higher Education

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Final report, September 2003

This report will examine and summarise my research and observations on various approaches to teaching improvisation amongst the HE sector in the UK today. It was carried out during the 2002-2003 academic year at several different HE institutions in the UK. They include-

Guildhall School for Music and Drama

Royal Academy of Music

Goldsmiths University

Kingston University

Brunel University

Thames Valley University

While the above are but a few of the much larger number of institutions offering improvisation in the curriculum throughout the UK, they offer a somewhat varied approach in teaching style and emphasis as well as musical level and background of the students. From this, one can get a basic idea of the state of improvisation teaching in the UK today. Where its strengths and weaknesses lie, and ways forward. The following general areas were of particular interest to me in my observations:

- What handouts (written materials) were used?
- What non-written- (taught by ear) exercises of learning methods were used?
- What teaching methods were the most effective in getting students to improvise? (I.e. written vs. non-written materials, verbal cajoling and/or other motivational encouragement to students)
- How much of the following was emphasised?

Rhythm skills and rhythm work (clapping games, foot tapping, swaying, etc)

Provision of harmonic, melodic and scalar information

Emphasis on interacting directly with other members of the group

- Which students seemed to receive the bulk of the tutors' attention, if any. Singers? "front line" (melody) players? Rhythm section players?
- How was the teaching geared to the singers? Was the material and suggestions communicated differently?
- What other factors (i.e. tutor's manner, encouraging and relaxing student through humour, etc) might have influenced the effectiveness of the session.
- Summary- how effective was the session? Did the students make strides forward? If not in their ability to improvise but their willingness to take on the challenge?

As these observations were made informally, mostly through arrangements I made with colleagues in education, I did not find it necessary to include the tutor's names. The emphasis being on their teaching techniques and materials and the impact that it had on the students and overall session.

In addendum to this report, I am submitting separate Teaching Session Observation (TSO) forms which provide more specified data on what transpired at the session. These notes and observations are the basis for my general observations and summary of this report.

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

The following areas were regularly addressed in the classes and workshops I observed.

Rhythm-

Rhythmic structures- The particular rhythmic forms and emphasis of a given tune were looked at by the students. This allowed them to grow comfortable with the music via experiencing only the rhythmic implications of it initially. This helped the student to gain confidence in order to attempt an improvised solo.

In one 2nd year class, an Afro-Cuban piece "Afro Blue" was explored mainly from the different clave beats and rhythmical pulses as the basis for improvisation. Applying other harmonic and melodic information was a secondary factor, as the better the student was able to grasp the rhythmical pulse it enabled them to improvise more freely.

In the same class, a warmup vocal/rhythm exercise in a 6/4 metre was used as an introduction to the featured song of the day which was also in 6/4. Having introduced this groove early on made for an effective and easier transition for the students moving from piece to piece.

Rhythm skills-

There were many practical rhythmic exercises and clapping games, etc that students were encouraged to do.

These included the following-

"Human drum kit" which involved different students providing tapping or clapping the different parts of what the drums do in order to keep swing time. This was done while swaying back and forth "in two" creating a steady pulse throughout the entire exercise. Co-ordination exercises involving doing several different rhythms with feet and hands simultaneously. Students (and observers!) were surprised at how difficult some of these exercises were to do. When not holding their instrument they often felt very naked and exposed while trying out these basic patterns. The tutor suggested that they apply the same rhythmic pattern materials in their improvised solos. If accomplished, this could lead to a solo with a conventional melodic structure featuring unusual rhythmic accents.

Harmony/Theory

One module spent an entire 2-hour class on harmonic analysis and discussion of various scales, including ones called the "Messiaen Mode" and "Tritone-Chord Scale", as well as a copious review of what the melodic and harmonic minor scales consisted of. The analysis of the Gershwin song "I Got Rhythm" examined many different chord variations that could be utilised over this theme.

Many of the classes would quickly review the harmony of a given song before commencing to play and improvise over it. This would be done verbally and by asking the student what the notes in the chords or scales were in their key. Sometimes a particularly difficult harmonic section of the song would be "looped" (repeated over and over again) in order to develop familiarity negotiating through that section.

While harmony and theory were recognised and certainly factors in the process, they were not overly emphasised to the point of bogging the student down with too much information. Most of the classes were of elementary/intermediate level as opposed to advanced and didn't require too much attention in this area. It seemed to me that the students who needed more attention in that area were encouraged to work on it on their own time, away from the classes.

Vocal Work

There were a variety of vocal exercises and effects practised. These were given to all students regardless of their instrument. They were effective for several reasons mainly because they seemed to physically and psychologically relax the student and put them in a good frame of mind to improvise. These were similar to the "human drum kit" with 3 or 4 groups of students doing different rhythms and effects creating an almost improvised sound and feeling. Various "soloists" would be singled out to actually improvise for a short while which often resulted in a spirited inspired solo. This is interesting in light of the fact that many vocalists would be uncomfortable improvising in front of others but this setting takes away that apprehension to a significant extent.

Another similar vocal exercise had students “looping” different 1-bar vocal ideas while an individual would improvise over the top. This combination of rhythmic work and vocal expression was effective in training one to count and express at the same time.

In several classes vocalist were encouraged to sing (not improvise) the words to a song in the following different ways-

Recite (not sing) the words in tempo as if one were reading a poem.

Sing the melody just using the sound “la”, instead of the words.

Experimenting with different rhythmic inflections (i.e. 12/8 and 6/8 triplet feel) as a means of developing sense of swing.

Stop and start- having the singer sing 6 bars then stop for 2 bars and resume after that. Or other variations similarly. This allows the singer to reflect briefly on what they’ve done as well as approach the next section differently.

Singing the words well “ahead of” or “behind the beat”, as if one were deliberately rushing or delaying when the lyric should “normally” be sung. This technique shows the vocalist how free they can be in exploring how a song can be interpreted.

While many of these techniques might seem unrelated to improvisation they actually involve a lot of the same thinking mechanisms. Improvisation is very much about time and space and doing the same thing (interpreting a lyric) in several different ways by varying the rhythms and/or amount of time given to a phrase, enables one to develop a sense of elasticity. Improvisation is contingent on developing these flexible skills, so they are quite an appropriate part of the process.

Free, less structured improvisational sessions

Some classes did not involve conventional songs with pre-set melodies and chord sequences. Instead they would encourage students to improvise using looser structures often dependent on freely interacting with others. One particularly effective example of this was when the tutor would select one student to act as “bandleader” giving him or her the say so as to who in the group should play or not at any given time. They would also be responsible for providing each group member with melodies or riffs (simple rhythmic motifs) to be played concurrently creating a collective palette from which a group improvisation would emerge. This exercise was varyingly successful musically but always had very positive educational merits.

Lectures/analysis on Jazz History/Styles

There were occasional mini-lectures given on a particular style, aspect or innovator of jazz that seemed appropriate to the lesson. For instance if a Charlie Parker or Miles Davis piece were to be played the tutor might offer a five minute talk on an aspect of that musician’s contribution. This also might include a brief analysis of a transcribed solo, pointing out how the innovator approached the tune rhythmically or harmonically. While too many of these lectures run the risk of stopping the flow of a practical session, a brief foray can provide a well deserved rest and allow the student to reflect on the import of these innovator’s contributions.

What is improvisation in the pedagogical sense? How can it be taught? Are there different ways in which it can be introduced to students?

There are relatively few HE institutions in the UK which offer a module uniquely devoted to improvisation alone. Most classes do not contain improvisation in the title and while it is the focus of the aims and learning outcomes, the teaching of it may be demonstrated in many different ways. The classes I observed though at Brunel University, Goldsmith’s College and the Guildhall School were exceptions to this, calling the module “Improvisation” and expecting all students to improvise at one point.

An example of how it can be taught while not being the immediate central focus of the class was in the 3rd Year vocal class I observed at the Royal Academy of Music. These singers were largely classically based and were being introduced to interpreting jazz and popular styles. The tutor, a jazz pianist and singer himself, stressed techniques that were geared at developing improvising skills. These included having the singer simply recite the lyrics, with out singing them as if reading a poem. Or singing the melody as it was written but altering the rhythms- not unlike the way an

improviser would in developing a rhythmic motive or “riff”. Similarly, a vocal tutor at Brunel University had students “rushing “ and/or “dragging” the melody and lyrics in order to create a sense of freedom within the song structure. While practising improvisation as such, these exercises helped very much to develop the freedom and confidence with filling up or leaving empty space. A skill and challenge that any improviser must acquire.

Students at Kingston University were introduced to improvisation via modules that were primarily addressing rhythm and harmony. A 1st year class “Groove and Rhythm Studies” analysed Latin Rhythms and clave patterns leading to students clapping these rhythms and then exchanging with each other as if they were improvising a duet. While the rhythms they were clapping were ostinato-like, the repetition of them in a spirited manner created an improvised feeling and climate to the surroundings that was very powerful. In both of the above examples, whether vocalising or clapping, students are encouraged to trust their own instincts and explore creating simple variations over repeated themes.

Inclusiveness- how were various members of a class or ensemble regarded as to the role they played? Did certain members receive more attention than others?

One of the problems with teaching improvisation or ensemble skills is that the melody line players (usually horns, singers and guitarists) because they are doing most of the improvising tend to be too much of the focus in the lesson. This was evident in a few of the sessions that I observed. While the melody players are clearly benefiting, other players (bassists and drummers, usually) tend to be overlooked. They are often left to their own devices, only spoken to when a specific rhythmic function is to be provided or to comment on when a tempo slows down or speeds up. This runs the risk of their feeling left out of the educational value of the lesson. In addition, the melody players suffer as well. By not being made aware enough of the rhythm section’s role, improvisers are not allowed to develop interactive skills engaging with them. If everyone in the group knows the important functions of the bass and drums they can use that knowledge to their advantage in developing their role as the soloist. In some cases they might as well be playing with a play-along CD, as the tutor will be overly focussed on the notes they are playing, and whether they fit into the chord scales of the harmony or not.

By addressing this problem with a more holistic teaching approach to the group, the lesson will be more balanced if each member of the group gets the feedback they need. The major differences between jazz and classical music are rhythmic structures and concepts. If the tutor can focus on these differences in the lesson, all of the students will benefit.

Summary

While this brief look into improvisation teaching in the UK is just scratching the surface, there are a few trends and tendencies that were noted. They include the following:

- Rhythm skills and practise via clapping, tapping and vocal exercises were emphasised widely and provided an excellent training ground for future improvisers.
- Emphasis on vocalising, for instrumentalists and vocalists was an effective way to open up one’s creative portals towards improvisation. What we sing (no matter how badly) is often closer to the musical ideas we have in our head than that of what we finger on our instruments. By getting improvisers to sing, we can help to open up what is inside them.
- Repeated tries at improvising interspersed with comments/feedback from the tutor. This workshop-type of an approach was effective because it allowed the student to learn “in the heat of battle” as it were. It seems the best way for students to benefit from a tutor’s suggestion was to attempt it immediately in front of the others. The results of which are often an improvement on what they’ve done or a worthwhile effort, at least.
- A relaxed and informal teaching atmosphere was an opportune setting for getting good results from students improvising. Sessions full of banter and good humoured cajoling and encouragement, went a long way to bringing out the best efforts. Especially for students who are often frightened and apprehensive about the task at hand-taking an improvised solo.

This brief survey and summary might help to flag the need for more attention and support for the teaching of improvisation at the HE level in the UK. While many of the examples discussed were in jazz improvisation, there are many other musical genres that utilise it to a great extent. The amount of enthusiasm I witnessed in HE students wanting to broaden their horizons along with experience improvisation, was inspiring and bodes well for the future. I can safely attest to the worthiness of this discipline being included in the curriculum of any HE music programme today.

Frank Griffith, London, September 2003