

Improvisational Approaches

Introduction

Improvisation has been an integral part of music since its very beginning, and it has been a very important element in Western Classical music for most of the past 1000 years. For example:

- a) Original score notations for Medieval organ music commonly include instructions for improvisation and embellishments. Scales that were used were selected according to the same improvisation principles now used in Jazz.
- b) Improvisational sections were often included in many classical scores. For example, the preludes to keyboard suites by Bach and Handel consisted solely of a progression of chords. The performers used these as basis for their improvisation. In the scores of today most of these progressions have been translated into full music notations by various editors.
- c) During the Baroque - (1600 - 1750), Classical - (1750 - 1830), and Romantic - Periods (1830 - 1900) improvisation flourished, especially for keyboard players. J.S. Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and many other distinguished composers and virtuoso pianists, excelled in the art of improvisation, in those days called 'extemporization'.

Towards the beginning of this century, improvisation inexplicably disappeared from Classical performances, and Classical music as a whole has been totally dominated (and in my opinion, restricted) by the written score.

Good improvisation skills rely on a thorough understanding and knowledge of chords, chord progressions and chord - scale relationships. The written score on the other hand can be (and often is) played without such knowledge. One simply reads and regurgitates input, with little (if any) interpretation of the music.

Despite the prevalent lack of constant improvisation in music throughout history, a few types of European music have been affected by the general trend, and have continued uninterrupted with their traditions of improvisation.

Examples of this can include:

- a) Irish folk music
- b) Hungarian Gypsy music
- c) Organ improvisation in churches (as discussed previously)

d) Spanish Flamenco music.

I would define improvisation as being the instant creation of a new melody. Improvisation is based on three main components:

- Melody
- Chord progression
- Scale progression

You can compare these three levels with a painting. The melody represents the shapes in the painting. The chords represent the colours filling and surrounding the shapes. The scales are the resource from which the melody notes and the chords are selected. They represent the palette of the painter:

Melody (shape)

Chords (colour)

Scale (palette)



Improvisation can be guided by any one of these components. For example, an improvisation can just be an embellishment of the original melody:



Embellishment of the original melody

Original Melody

Alternatively, the improvisation could be based on the tones of the underlying chords (through use of the notes in the arpeggios):



Use of chord tones

Chords

Yet another alternative is to improvise on the underlying scale (which of course includes all melody notes and chord tones):



Use of notes in the scale

Scale

Improvisation is important because a good soloist can dramatically change the atmosphere and feel of a piece. I also believe that good composition is intrinsically reliant on improvisation and that as improvisation is normally done over a pre-composed piece or chord progression, the two are very much inter-related.

Jazz Improvisation (modal)

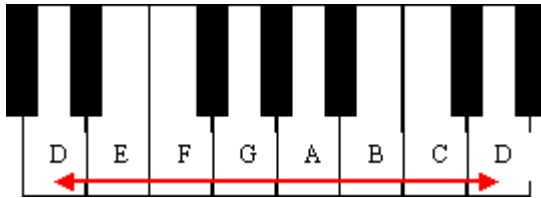
Over the years, Jazz improvisation as a whole has gradually developed through various levels. In the early days of Jazz (around 1900) improvisations were very simple and largely embellishments of the original song's melody. Gradually improvisation started to focus on chord tones, until in the Bebop era improvisation tapped the deepest level of the song, the scale progression. Experienced improvisers descend to an even deeper level by playing 'outside' the scale of the song. This occurs for example in so called 'side slipping' where the improviser uses a scale a semitone or a whole tone away from the proper scale.

In my improvisation lessons I have learnt that phrasing and idiom are the two most important aspects of jazz improvisation. I have found that the easiest way to phrase in an effective way is to vary the rhythmic activity of the instrument I am playing. Alternating periods of high activity (lots of quavers, semiquavers etc.) with periods of low activity (semibreves and more importantly, rests) provides very aesthetic phrasing:



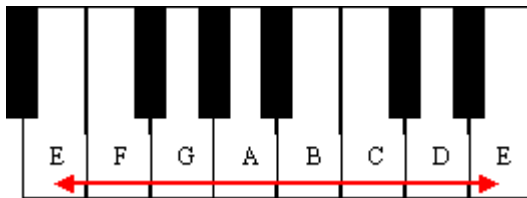
For our jazz improvisation assignment, we improvised in a modal style. There are 8 different modes for any scale. The different modes for the key of C are illustrated below (Ionian mode is excluded as it is the equivalent of a normal scale):

Dorian Mode of C



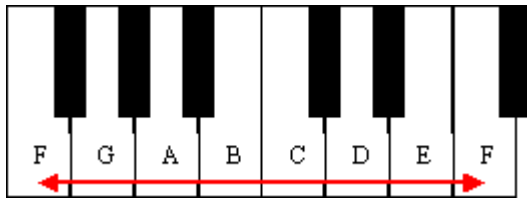
This is the most widely used mode. You can play it by starting on **D** (the white key between the two black keys) and play just the white keys to the next **D**. It is used a lot in folk music and jazz.

Phrygian Mode of C



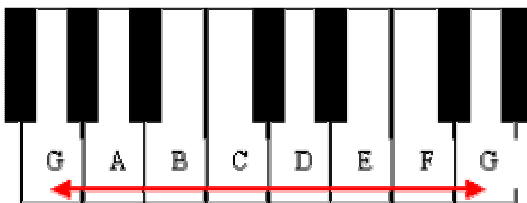
This mode begins on **E**. Play all the white keys up to the next **E**. It has a very sad sound and is heard in lots of Spanish, Hebrew, and Gypsy music. It is the only mode that begins with a half-step (semitone). Composers often use this mode when they want their music to sound Oriental.

Lydian Mode of C



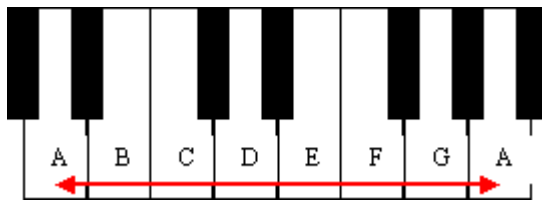
This mode sounds almost the same as the major scale. It has an odd-sounding 4th note. Start on **F** and play all the white keys up to the next **F**.

Mixolydian Mode of C



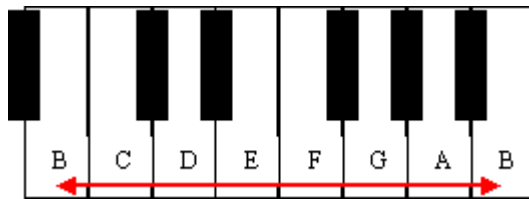
This has a long name, but is simple to play. Start on **G** and play all the white keys up to the next **G**. This also sounds like the major scale, but it has a strange-sounding 7th tone. It is used a lot in rock and roll and jazz music.

Aeolian Mode of C



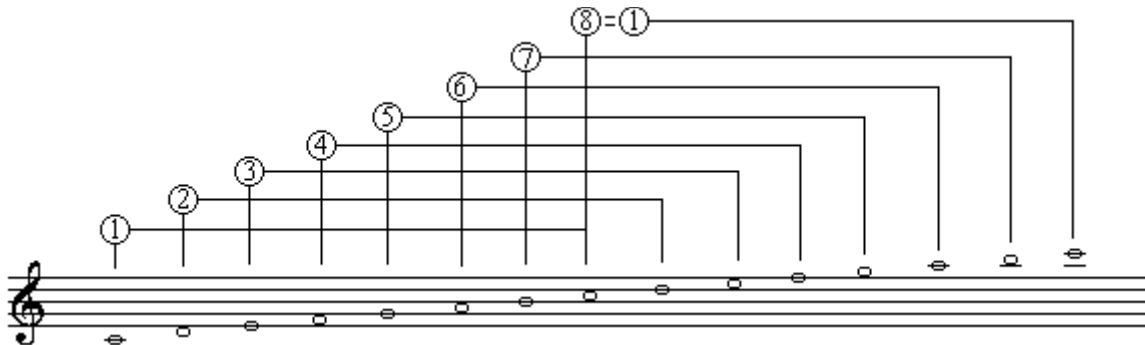
Start on **A** and play all the white keys up to the next **A**. This is also called the **natural minor scale**.

Locrian Mode of C



This mode sounds so strange it is almost never used. It begins and ends on **B**. You can forget this one

This diagram shows how the different modes of C look on the staff:



1. Ionian mode
2. Dorian mode
3. Phrygian mode
4. Lydian mode
5. Mixolydian mode
6. Aeolian mode
7. Locrian mode

- Major Scale played from note 1 to note 1
- Major Scale played from note 2 to note 2
- Major Scale played from note 3 to note 3
- Major Scale played from note 4 to note 4
- Major Scale played from note 5 to note 5.
- Major Scale played from note 6 to note 6
- Major Scale played from note 7 to note 7

By applying these same rules to any other major key it is easily possible to work out its modes.

In order to improvise effectively, it is necessary to have an intimate understanding of the root chord movements. I find it helpful to then move on to play each chord as an arpeggio i.e. playing each of the individual notes of the chord. Once I am fully comfortable with the chord pattern and arpeggios I can then begin to use different rhythms patterns one the notes of the arpeggios.

I find it easiest to practice my jazz improvisation by recording a chord sequence and literally fiddling about until I come up with a few phrases that I like. I can then utilize these phrases in actual improvisation. Here are a few licks I have come up with in the Dorian mode of D:

1:



2:



3:



4:



5:



6:



7:



8:



9:



10:



11:



12:



13:



14:



Blues Improvisation

The blues is normally built using a simple 12 bar sequence comprised of three chords, which allows for any number of variations. In these infinite improvisations we can often hear the call-and-response that was used by African-American slaves in the cotton fields. We can also hear stories of great suffering. The blues were originally sung to help people express sorrow, to comfort the listener and to tell a story. In New Orleans, with the instruments left over from the Civil War, musicians began to accompany blues singers to deepen the message of the blues. The blues were the underground aquifer that fed many streams of music, including: jazz, R&B, soul, and rock and roll.

A blues scale is comprised of the following tones: 1 / b3 / 4 / b5 / 5 / b7 and is therefore a pentatonic minor scale plus a b5. Use of the full range of this scale throughout various octaves, coupled with phrasing (as discussed before), makes it possible to improvise with great emotion.

As with jazz improvisation, the only way to improve your improvisation in a blues context is to just get on and do it! I practice by getting someone else to play a 12 bar sequence and experimenting until I come up with a good phrase. It also helps to listen to blues artists to understand what a decent blues riff sounds like. I find listening to Eric Clapton's work from the mid 60's really helps me.

Here are a few examples of blues riffs I have come up with:

1:

```

|--5--7 (HO) --5--5--|
|--5--7 (HO) --5--5--|
|-----7--6--|
|-----|
|-----|
|-----|
|-----|

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2:

```

|-----|
|-----|
|--5--7 (HO) --5--5--|
|--5--7 (HO) --5--5--|
|-----8--7--|
|-----|

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3: (Slide into the Notes...)

```

|-----12-----11-----10-----8--|
|-12-----12--11-----11--10-----10--8--|
|-----9--|
|-----|
|-----|
|-----|

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4: (also Slide in the Notes...)

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|-----5--|
|-5--7--5--7--|
|-----6--|
|-5--7--5--7--|
|-----|
|-----|

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5:

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|--7 (BU, RE) --5--|
|-----7 (BU, RE) --5--|
|-----7 (BU, RE) --5--|
|-----7--|
|-----|
|-----|

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6:

```

|-----7 (BU) --5--|
|-----5--|
|-----5--7--8--7--|
|-----5--5--7--|
|-5--6--7--7--|
|-----|

```

7:

```

|-----5--|
|-----|
|-8--7--5--7 (BU) --5--|
|-----7--|
|-----4--4--5--5--6--6--7--8--7--|
|-----5--5--|

```

8:

```

|-----|
|-----8--7--|
|-----7--6--|
|-----|
|-----|

```

9:

```

|-----5--|
|-----5--8 (PO) --5--5--|
|--7 (BU) -----8--8--7 (PO) --5 (PO) -----7--5 (V) --|
|-----7--7--|
|-----|
|-----|

```


10:

```

|-----12--15--11 (SL) --12-----|
|-----13-----13-----|
|--14-----14--12-----|
|-----14--13--12 (V) -----|
|-----|
|-----|

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11:

```

|-----8--7--5-----|
|-----5 (SL) --7--5-----|
|-----5-----5 (SL) --7--5-----2-----|
|--5--6--7--7-----0--1--2-----|
|--5--8-----0-----|

```

12:

```

|-----5-----5-----5-----5-----|
|-----7 (BU) -----7 (BU) -----7 (BU) -----7--5--4--5 (HO) -----|
|-----7-----|
|-----|
|-----|

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Melodic Improvisation (vocal)

Melodic improvisation is based around the root chords of a particular piece. As with jazz and blues improvisation, it is essential to have a good knowledge of the underlying chord pattern. By using different notes from the arpeggios of these chords, a deeply contrasting melody line can be improvised, often giving a more soulful sound and feel than the mere regurgitation of a piece.

A good knowledge of the scales is, as always, extremely useful as it gives the performer a huge expanse of notes to choose from. Using octaves of particular notes can help to add to the emotion of the improvisation.

One of my favourite singer's in terms of vocal improvisation is Eva Cassidy. Her interpretation of 'Fields of Gold', originally by Sting, has become as well known as the original. She has taken what I believe was already a beautiful song and highlighted its melancholic ring through emotional embellishments of the original melody.

Eva Cassidy sums up for me what melodic improvisation, particularly in a vocal setting, is all about – taking a song and making it your own through musical expression of the emotions the song evokes.

Personal Evaluation

I believe I have made a lot of progress throughout the year in our music improvisation lessons. We started by learning about modal jazz improvisation. To start with I was very tentative when first improvising in this style as I had only played jazz scores (as a saxophonist) before and had never had to improvise.

I gained confidence as I became more familiar with the root chord movements although I found it difficult to utilize phrasing in my playing because as a bass player I normally have to maintain a steady rhythm and keep 'locked in' with whatever the drummer/percussionist is playing. I find phrasing a lot easier when I am playing guitar. I found my knowledge of scales particularly useful as it allowed me to use a large range of notes. However, I could often hear certain lines in my head but I could not play them immediately. It was sometimes only by taking time to figure out what I was 'hearing' that I could play them.

I had not played a lot of jazz before at all as a bass player nor was I particularly interested in it but I am now confident in improvising in a modal style and this module re-ignited my interest in the genre.

I found the blues assignments relatively easy as I have been brought up listening to and singing and playing bluegrass and folk rock music on the guitar and violin. These music types stem directly from blues so I found the transition to blues fairly easy in terms of what scales to use. However, I had not played blues as a bassist before so I again found it a lot harder to use phrasing when soloing on the bass than on the guitar as I had a sort of mental block, which made it hard to break out of the basic rhythm. As with jazz, I found it difficult to immediately play lines I could hear in my head. As I became more confident I could play new lines more instinctively and I really felt as though I could express myself through the music.

I found melodic improvisation extremely easy compared to the other assignments. With the other modules, I could always 'hear' the lines but was sometimes unable to play them, which I found very frustrating. However, when improvising vocally, I did not have to think where certain notes were or use particular 'shapes' – I could just sing whatever line I could hear. I have been improvising melodically for a long time. I have Irish grandparents who taught me a lot of Irish folk songs when I was small and these involve a lot of melodic improvisation both vocally and instrumentally, so I have been exposed to melodic improvisation from a young age. Also, when writing my own songs I generally start with a chord sequence and write a melody line using vocal improvisation until I find a line I really like. I can hear harmonies fairly easily, which was also helpful.

Although I found this melodic vocal improvisation the easiest of the modules, I believe I actually improved a lot more in the jazz and blues modules as I found them both difficult to start with but very enjoyable by the time we were assessed.