

Workshops in improvisation

For classically-trained musicians

INSTRUCTOR: DR. Jonathan Ayerst
jonathanwayerst@gmail.com



Introduction

Dr Jonathan W. Ayerst graduated from the Royal Academy of Music, London, before joining the contemporary music group Remix Ensemble, Casa da Música in Portugal in 2000. He has toured Europe performing as a soloist and chamber musician, working closely with leading figures of contemporary music. His own journey of learning to improvise is documented in a PhD thesis: [Learning to improvise as a Western classical musician: a psychological self study](#). Since 2021 he has been increasingly active as a concert improviser on the organ and piano.

My approach to teaching is based in psychological research, music theory and practical experience. Classical musicians often feel anxiety and embarrassment at the idea of improvising, but, once these initial cognitive and emotional barriers are overcome, students can benefit from new insights into musical structure and a sense of creative empowerment arising from improvising on classical forms and genres. In each workshop I introduce new skills through structured games and exercises, showing students how to solve problems, maintain a sense of creative 'flow' and attain achievable goals in improvisation.

Workshop 1 (3 hours)

Creativity and experimentation

Overview:

In this session students begin their experience in creating and organising musical elements, using their imagination in response to constraints. They engage in critical reflection of classical music as a cultural practice and learn to challenge their role as solely interpretive musicians.

Procedure

- A discussion about improvisation in classical music.
 - Who improvises? Why don't more classical musicians improvise? What/who prevents improvisation? What caused the decline in improvisation after the Baroque era?
- Free improvisation through games and graphic scores.
 - Each student in turn makes small (1 minute) improvisations exploring different constraints.
 - Students create graphic scores in small groups. These scores explore expressive contrasts and techniques of mapping (organising) music over time.
- Closing discussion in which students articulate, discuss, and share impressions of their initial experience in improvisation.

Learning objectives: to gain a new perspective on classical music as a cultural practice and a new perspective on one's creative role within his practice. To understand how to represent music graphically, using the graphic score to organise music over time. To separate and select elements of a musical texture, recombining these to describe a narrative or expressive concept.

Workshop 2 (3 hours)

Expression vs. rules?

Overview:

This workshop builds on the techniques and creative freedoms gained in the previous session. I introduce, step-by-step, different rules and techniques which result in clearly identifiable musical styles and genres.

Procedure

- Students prepare group improvisations in the following styles:
 - Mediaeval
 - Contemporary I/II/III
- Free improvisation session using ostinato patterns and dance rhythms.
- Two more group improvisations based on diatonic (voice-leading) principles
 - Renaissance
 - Baroque

Learning objectives: to understand how musical structure is not fixed but flexible, and capable of manipulation towards expressive ends. The students now have first-hand experience of recreating recognisable musical styles through identifying and selecting musical elements such as characteristic scales, rhythms, textures and then using these elements conceptually as a basis for improvising.

Workshop 3 (3 hours)

Scores, schemas and inspiration

Overview: This workshop extends the techniques and creative freedoms gained in the previous session, to allow individuals to improvise solos using their own choice of scores as models.

Procedure

- Each student submits a classical score as a model for improvisation.
- Within the group we examine each score and analyse all possible elements that one could use for improvising: rhythm, melodic contour, harmony, timbre, texture, mood etc.
- The student then improvises on a single element or a combination of several elements. Each time we discuss how the original model is replicated and on what the improviser focuses (i.e., their cognitive model) to maintain expressive freedom. This step is repeated several times using different elements.
- The effect of each combination and selection of musical elements is discussed with the student and with the group.

Learning objectives: The student learns to use a musical score as a model for improvisation. To identify and select different musical elements, treating these elements as a conceptual (general) principle for improvisation. The perception and acquisition of underlying conceptual principles provides a secure experiential basis in problem solving from which the student is able to develop their own interests in improvisation.

Fees and Conditions

Duration

Each workshop lasts for three hours (including twenty minutes of break). Workshops can be booked individually or collectively, and can be held on consecutive days.

Content

The workshops as described above serve as a guide only. The content of each workshop will vary depending on the ability, background, interest and individuality of the participants. However, the overall learning objectives of each workshop will be maintained whatever the content.

Number of students

The workshops aim to teach a participant group of between 7-15 students. Listeners/observers are welcome if the space is large enough.

Equipment

A space adequate for seating and working in different groups is required with tables or flat surfaces for writing.

Students should bring their instruments, also paper and pens for writing.

A white board with black/coloured marking pens mounted on the wall or on a stand.

An overhead projector for displaying powerpoint presentations (not essential).

A piano, organ or keyboard