

Teaching Improvisation in the Orchestra

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Why teach improvisation?

- Personal expression
- Spontaneous composition
- Practical music theory
- Amp up your concerts
- Enrichment for advanced students



How to get started?

- Use a drum beat or backup track
- Call & Response - "I play, then you play it back"
- Start with 1 note and GRADUALLY increase the number of notes
- A-Minor Pentatonic: A-C-D-E-G-A (starting on G-string, or A-string for basses)
- Yes, the teacher must lead the Call & Response
- Compare "improvisation" to "talking with friends"

Next-step options:

- Practice and memorize patterns to develop "muscle memory"
- Group Improv Patterns
- "Trade 2's" - people take turns improvising 2 measures at a time
- Songs and play-along tracks from method books
- Repertoire with improvisation "solo sections"

Concert options:

- Add repeat markings and insert a solo in a rock/fiddle piece
- Change backup parts to Pizz. so soloists can be heard
- Use electric instruments
- Turn any instrument into an "electric" one with a tuner pickup
- Perform a song with a "solo section"

Important scale types:

- Minor Pentatonic: D-F-G-A-C-D
- Major: D-E-F#-G-A-B-C#-D
- Mixolydian: D-E-F#-G-A-B-C-D
- Blues Scale: D-F-G-G#-A-C-D
- Natural Minor: D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C-D
- Harmonic Minor: D-E-F-G-A-Bb-C#-D

Useful Method Books:

Basic Fiddlers Philharmonic

-Simple & Adv. Tunes, Backup Part

Jazz Philharmonic

-Tune, 2 Backup Parts, Prep. Exerc., Sample Solos

Jazz Basics for Strings

-Full Arrangements, Preparatory Exercises

Fiddlers Philharmonic

-Adv. Tunes, 2 Backup Parts

Mark Wood Method (Advanced)

-Adv. Excerc., Head Charts, Sample Solos

Repertoire:

(I found these pieces by searching jwpepper.com, using the keywords “string orchestra improvise”, and then clicking on the “Easy” filter in the left sidebar.)

Rock Style

Arizona Sun, Mark Wood - **A Major**

String Thang, Mark Wood - **E Minor Pentatonic or E Blues**

Hunters of Avatar, Mark Wood - **E Minor Pentatonic**

Pepperoni Pizza Rock, Brian Balmages (Very Easy) - **E Minor Pentatonic**

Ballad Style

Blue Skies and Bright Stars, Matt Turner - **C Major**

Prarie Waltz, Matt Turner - **C Major or C Pentatonic**

Star Lake, Matt Turner - **D Major**

Fiddle Style

Fiddle Somethin', Larry Clark - **D7 (D Mixolydian)**

Japanese Hoedown, Keiko Yamada - **D Pentatonic or D7 (D Mixolydian)**

Swing Style

Shuffleupagus, Matt Turner - **G Minor Pentatonic or G Blues**

Other Styles

Spy Vs Spy, Matt Turner (Tango) - **B Harmonic Minor**

Calypso, Martin Norgaard (Calypso) - **G Major**

Educational Objectives:

- Improvising with 1 scale (easy)
- Improvising with several scale types (medium)
- Improvising over multiple chords (long, challenging road)
- One improv song per year (easy)
- One improv song in each concert (medium)

Free Stuff at www.stepwisepublications.com/free-stuff.html

- Asha Mevlana A-Minor Pentatonic backup track
- Call & response patterns
- Group improv patterns
- Full song, “Fractured Elements”, featuring A-Minor Pentatonic solo section