

Strategies for Improvisation

The title above may confuse those that narrowly define improvisation. Most conceive of the act as one that is wholly random in execution, dictated only by the passions and whims of the moment. That viewpoint is certainly one way to approach an improvisation, but there are myriad more.

In this essay it is my goal to introduce the reader and prospective improviser to some ways to think about their function and goal in an improvisation. There are several stratagems one could use, from the basic nuclear idea of completely free improv all the way up to various forms of 'structured' or 'directed' improv.

First we must tackle the idea and definition of Improvisation.

Most dictionaries list the following under their definitions:

1. to compose and perform or deliver without previous preparation; extemporize: to improvise an acceptance speech.
2. to compose, play, recite, or sing (verse, music, etc.) on the spur of the moment.
3. to make, provide, or arrange from whatever materials are readily available: We improvised a dinner from yesterday's leftovers.

The problem with these definitions is that they are a little contradictory. For instance, in #1 it cites a criterion of "without previous preparation" while in #3 the implication is that there can be elements that have been previously prepared (last night's leftovers) that one can use for an improvised goal. This seeming contradiction is actually to your advantage as it leaves the door open for the use of many different improvisational strategies.

I translate this to mean that one can use ANYTHING that has been pre-prepared, as long as the WAY IN WHICH IT IS USED is extemporaneous, spontaneous, and largely unplanned.

For instance, you can write bits of dialog on pieces of paper, making them predetermined, but then you choose them randomly to read. You can also take bits of music, samples, loops, etc., and as long as you choose to "play" them with spontaneous intent, you are still being faithful to the ideal of extemporaneous improvisation. This is a VERY important distinction. PaperBag utilizes this framework in their improvisations to a high degree; we will take a large variety of sound-making devices, loops, samples, and whatnot to a show, but we don't plan what we will grab and play when, we do it based on our instincts in the moment.

Starting with the most simplistic strategy in music, you have the "one person, one instrument, no framework" plan. You are just JAMMING. I put that term in capital letters because that is the word that is understood by most people, musicians and non-musicians alike, to describe what is usually called "free improvisation." There is no restriction on the musician, no 'framework'

Framework. In painting, you tend to put a frame around a picture. That device, called a frame, both limits and defines the picture's extent. It's how you can tell it is a complete and separate work, not part of the wall itself. It serves to isolate the image by providing a border for it. It invites the viewer to focus on the object so framed.

This is really the same thing in music. We frame music using various methods. The idea of Tonal Center or Key, the metrical structure or Time Signature, the stylistic elements of timbre, ethnicity, song form, etc. are all framing elements in music.

We take a lot of this for granted as listeners, until something unusual happens in the music that makes us feel it has inappropriately leapt beyond its proper frame. For example, if we were listening to a Church Choir that all of a sudden broke into a Death-Metal groove, we might be a bit taken aback. If our country song in slow 4/4 time turned into bebop jazz in a fast odd tempo, we might get a little annoyed.

You get the idea. These framing elements define what the music is, what "type" it follows. In "free improv" or jamming, there are almost no frameworks. The musician does whatever they are inspired to do.

Imposing a frame necessarily limits what the musician can do, but more often than not it serves to FOCUS the musician's intent and musical statement into a form that is not totally random. For instance, most people would agree that a "jam" with an understandable tonal center, and a defined rhythmic pulse is more fun to listen to and far less abstract sounding than a free jam. Hey, maybe you can even DANCE to it!

By this accounting, there is actually very little totally free-of-framework music out there. You may actually require a computer to make music that is really totally random. The human ear likes structure in music, and seeks out structure, and when the structure is recognized, there's a bit of pleasure that we get from the recognition. Ever turn on the radio in mid-song and it takes a few seconds until you recognize the tune? Your ear wants to know and find order in the music, and you get happy when you get there.

So the next step beyond free improv is improv with a framework.

As mentioned above, the framework can take a number of forms, and the improviser can utilize one or more frameworks in a given improvisation. This can be decided on beforehand, as in using any pre-prepared element. PaperBag would have a 'huddle' before embarking on a piece, to briefly set a framework. This could be just defining a key or rhythm to play in, or it could get markedly more complex and even use impressionistic language as a framework, as in "Let's play something Dark and Nasty and Slithery and segue to something like music for Friendly Rabbits."

Again, it is the application of frameworks in various ways that constitute an arsenal of possibilities for the improviser.

You could possibly create a basic top-down ordering of framework complexity in the following list:

Level 1: Free improv

Level 2: One Simple Framework improv (by 'simple', I mean defining only a key center, or only a rhythm idea, or only a tonal idea)

Level 3: Two or more Simple Framework improv

Level 4: One Complex Framework improv (by my definition, anything 'complex' is understood to be an idea that is *beyond the conventional elements of music*, like Key, Rhythm, or Tone, and which requires some sort of impressionistic interpretation on the part of the improviser)

Level 5: Two or more Complex Framework improv

Level 6: Mixed or Mutating Simple and Complex Framework improv

Level 7: Mostly Composed Music with Improvised Sections (this would be Jazz, for instance)

Level 8: Completely Composed Music (with no improvisational elements whatsoever)

You might agree or disagree, but that's ok because to my knowledge there is no formal scale on this topic (unless some musicological expert has invented one and if you know of such please let me know since I'd be fascinated to read it.) and this is just my take on it.

It should be noted that a given improvisation may meander from level 1 to level 6 within one piece—and why not? Given the possibilities in the combining of levels you may never run out of potential framework combinations to use.

To get away from the idea of levels to focus more on the concept of a "complex" improvisation, one should recognize that this category is as infinite as one's imagination, and limited only by the musicians' own interpretive skill.

For instance, one can offer something very complex but easily understood as a framework for improvisation. Something with a great deal of poetic resonance or well-understood symbolism perhaps, like "let's play something that sounds Shakespearean" – you might then improvise something that sounds like it came from Elizabethan English Romance! One can go to extremes of abstraction and offer "Let's play something that sounds like a flying blue Key Lime Pie with wheels on it!"—I have NO IDEA what that would sound like, but then that is the interpretive challenge for the musician.

BTW, you will not and should not worry about whether you accurately capture the sound of “Shakespearean” or “flying blue Key Lime Pie with wheels”—the only important thing to be true to is your INTENT.

Impressionism in music. Here’s the definition: A style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, using somewhat vague harmony and rhythm to evoke a mood, place, and natural phenomena.

The practice of expressing or developing one's subjective response to a work of art or to actual experience.

In order to be true to your intent as an improvising musician you must really spend a LOT OF TIME playing your chosen instrument with the idea of expressing actual things. Not just notes. Expressing objects, concepts, and ideas. How does one do that exactly? No one really knows, but it happens. Somewhere in the preverbal parts of our brains we feel things and know things for which there are no words.

As an artist we strive to be sensitive to this truth, and we train and practice our whole lives in order to learn to channel this preverbal knowledge into musical expression. As the definition above says, this is subjective. My knowledge of “boxy orange plants” and my attempts to give an impression of that concept musically is going to be completely different from yours.

The only way I will ever be successful at this is if the implausible occurs: someone comes up to me after I play and says to me, “you know, I really got the impression of boxy orange plants from the notes you played.” So I really never expect this. When I go to an art museum to look at an abstract impressionist work, more often than not I don’t see what the artist saw, and that’s ok. I just see something cool that makes me feel something, understand something of the artist’s intent. That’s good enough for me.

You and I cannot judge an impression for it’s quality—by definition it needs no quality other than the ability to suggest an impression. If you can do that as a musician, you’ve succeeded. Heck, someone may even LIKE what you played, and just possibly, they might even try to dance to it.

-G. Radai 7/12/12