



John Teske – 6 Graphic scores

*Developing creativity  
and musical sense  
through improvisation*

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*How can singing belong to everyone?*

*Formal singing-based music education at school*

*Developing creativity and musical sense through improvisation.*

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 A brief introduction to improvisation

Improvisation = in | pro | videre: literally = do not | in advance | view, do not preview, act on the moment.

In your daily life you often improvise without knowing it: you always have to face unpredictable situations, make decisions or change plans. Want to buy some food ? But you forgot your wallet. Want to give copies to your students ? But the copy-machine is broken. Time for the concert ? But the pianist is still not there (NB: I have nothing against pianists...).

So why not improvising in music ? Improvisation preceded codification and was always used along centuries.

### 1.2 The benefits of improvisation

Practising improvisation is highly recommended by famous pedagogues such as Kodaly, Orff, Dalcroze, Willems and so on. The benefits and the applications are varied:

- Developing curiosity and personality
- Opening the mind
- Expanding/exploring possibilities in musical behaviour and voice control
- Expressing feelings regardless of the technique
- Developing self confidence
- Help the students to synthesize/experience what they have learned (and at the same time, test their knowledge and understanding)
- Stimulate concentration, listening and imagination

The aim of this workshop is to show you how improvisation can be used to improve musical skills and knowledge of your students and how it can help them to find and express their personality. Even if I'll present several different tools and try to cover a wide range of situations you may have to face, this presentation is not exhaustive and you'll probably discover other tools and tips to use in your lessons.

## 2 The fundamentals

### 2.1 Improvise yourself !

If you want your students to improvise, you should be able to improvise yourself, without fear and with conviction. Giving a great number of samples will help to open the minds and enlarge the field of possibilities. And instead of basically speaking, if you sing yourself in your lessons, you are transmitting the love of singing, without worrying about this terrific word: improvisation.

You can even ask your pupils not to open the mouth but for singing: "You want to go to the toilets ? Ask me by singing." "You forgot your stuff at home ? Tell me by singing."

=> be inspired by *The Sound of Music*, the famous American musical.

### 2.2 Limit the parameters

Don't forget that a sound has 4 parameters: pitch, duration, dynamic and timbre (colour). You can act on all of them for only one note, changing all of them at each note or making them evolve for each note. Then, you have silence, music would not exist if silence did not exist.

=>So this is the first point: set a frame ! The more the frame is restricted, the more the performers have to find new ideas and enlarge their vision. Whatever the exercise is, question/answer game, finish-the-song game, mad-machine game and so on, remember that the main point to help children to improve is to add constraints. For example, you can:

- limit the number of notes (start to improvise with one single note: it helps to become aware of the existence of other parameters, including silence, and add new notes each time children have learnt a new note. Use melodic scales such as pentatonic, whole tone scales, mode of limited transposition, etc.)
- ask to play only on dynamics and all kinds of articulations (ppp to fff, cresc/decrec., accents, staccato, legato, portato, sfz, fp, etc.)
- use a fixed rhythm cell (the one you've just studied for example): Ta TiTi, sicilienne, added values, combination of any known rhythm – NB: when working on rhythm, it's important to give and maintain a steady beat so that there is no time for hesitation, music just has to spread out. Rhythm can be talked, sung or clapped, using all body parts or even mouth drumming if you work with teenagers.
- ask them not to start on the first beat but to prefer upbeat
- fit in a predefined metric (2/4, 3/4, 6/8, 5/8, 7/8, etc.)
- fit in a predefined harmony (chords sequence, ground)
- fit above a predefined melody (embellishment, descant, counterpoint)
- fit in a predefined form/structure (AA+coda, aria da capo, sonata, rondo, etc.)
- use a text and respect its stresses or its meaning or take the opposite way or deconstruct it
- use a cultural frame (local or foreign country folklore such as Provençal dance, "African" music, Japanese No theatre, etc.), a predefined aesthetic (music era, dance rhythm, composer's style) or genre (classical, contemporary, blues, rap, pop music, etc.)

Adapt these limitations to the level of your students and the goal of the exercise. Young children can only manage simple parameters, so if you want to develop consciousness of the beat for example, focus on unpitched rhythm exercises only and add notes later.

And if you feel the need to ask your students to improvise with a dodecaphonic sequence of microtones on a bossa nova rhythm, first check that you are able to do it yourself and set a good example... and ask yourself if this challenge is really useful: simplicity is often the most efficient.

## 2.3 Make it progressive

Whatever the context in which you are using improvisation is, you have to make it progressive !

Performing alone and having to face a group is not an easy task for everybody, even more when the performance is based upon improvisation. Because beyond the technique, improvising implies showing a part of yourself: the person that improvises exposes her personality to judgment. So this is the point: never force someone and use soft manners to help the students to develop their self-confidence and encourage them to go beyond their fears. Here are some tips:

- Install a relaxed atmosphere and free your students by using simple exercises/games where they can express themselves freely without constringent rules. And only after add some constraints to deal with. It's like a choir rehearsal, you need a warm-up first and this warm-up should help to free minds and bodies.
- At the beginning, especially with children, prefer exercises that involve all the group at the same time, not individuals, and make it progressive. For example:
  1. Start with breath improvisation only: ask everybody to breathe at their own rhythm, and to expire on "S" or "SH" sounds for example. Insist on respecting their own breath rhythm. As nobody has the same tempo, children will start to perform individually without knowing and worrying about it.
  2. Then ask them to expire with a mouth-closed sound, on the pitch they want (you can also use combination of voiced/unvoiced letters: S/Z, SH/J, F/V)
  3. Same but now with mouth opened, on any vowel,
  4. Then ask them to keep the same vowel but to modulate the pitch while expiring,
  5. With the same modulated voice, ask them now to replace the single vowel by 3 successive nonsense syllables (ex.: *Pa-Ti-Vo* - I hope this is nonsense in any language...),
  6. Start to make small groups so that others can listen while one group is performing,
  7. Now ask the children to employ more sounds, more syllables, as if they were speaking an imaginary language.
  8. Inside a group, ask the children to hold a conversation together, each one with its own imaginary language. That's it, they are now improvising alone in front of the others without shyness (well, it's not always so simple, but this is an idea that works quite often).
  9. In fact, from step 1, it would be a great idea to ask them to make movements as well. Example: imitate the breath by enlarging the arms, then follow the pitch

modulation with the hands, then joint gestures to the imaginary language.  
Gestures help to free the mind.

- Show great examples ! If you want to get the best from you students, you have to show them the best. Be crazy and open minded, they will be crazy and open minded, be frightened and unconvinced, they will be frightened and unconvinced. Remember that before showing skills, improvisation requires to be a volunteer, so: be a volunteer.
- Never forget this famous joke that is in fact not a joke but a truth when speaking about improvisation: “a wrong note played with hesitation is a wrong note, a wrong note played with conviction is an interpretation” (attributed to French clarinettist Claude Luter). So, beyond the development of skills and the resolution of technical problems, you have to lead your students to have good attitudes first.
- Focus on one goal at a time (is it to develop hearing, to develop a musical knowledge, to develop reactivity and creativity, etc.) and use the same exercise for several weeks until the students are comfortable with it and until you think the aim is reached. Of course, from one lesson to the other you can make the exercise evolve a little bit, add new constraints, change the frame or the subject, but keep in mind that practising again and again the same exercise will help the students to be more confident and more imaginative.

Finally, don't forget that as a teacher you are responsible for the atmosphere of the group. Sometimes, your students will need to laugh, particularly when they are not used to improvising (laughing is a natural expression against shyness), then use it and start improvising on laughs ! And if it becomes a little bit messy: let it be !... as long as you have the control of the situation and it remains a “reasonable” mess (if there is too much noise, never shout, just adopt a clear attitude such as standing in silence in front of the children, head down and wait... you always find help in some students starting to say to their friends: “Shut up, he's waiting for silence.”). With time, students will get used to improvisation and find it a very serious and cool way to learn music.

## 3 First developments with improvisation

### 3.1 Warm-up

As I said before, using improvisation from the warm-up will help students to feel confident and comfortable with the idea of improvisation and singing alone.

#### 3.1.1 Voice exploration

Explore the possibilities of the voice all together: ask them to make glissandi, forte piano, say any word all together, whistle, mouth cracks, etc. Soundpainting may be very useful for such a warm-up (discussed later).

#### 3.1.2 Clusters

Singing one note of any choice is already an improvisation. At your sign, all students sing and sustain a note to create a beautiful cluster. This very simple exercise has several benefits:

- It prepares everybody to listen to the others: each one must adapt his own volume to create a well-balanced cluster, to be part of the sound and not outside.
- It develops confidence: even if someone sings just a semitone from his neighbour, he must maintain this dissonance and not change his note (particularly when he adapts his volume).
- It helps shy children to participate as they are not exposed and it is a simple exercise.

Once you have reached a lovely sound, do other signs so everybody changes their note, creating new clusters. The point is to keep the balance even when changing the notes.

#### 3.1.3 Call/Response game

The basic question/answer game can be used as soon as the students enter into the classroom, for example: "Where do you come from?", "How did you come here?", "How do you feel today?", "Do you like opera?", etc.

One thing I often do with children is to check for presence at the beginning of the course, for example I sing: "Anna, are you there?" then the child should answer me singing something as "Yes, I am there."

Often, children will reply in the way you did: if your question is ff, their answer may be ff, if you make a scale up, they will probably make a scale up (or down, but a scale anyway). For the first lesson, leave them free to answer the way they want, this is the time for warm-up only. At that time, the only thing you may focus on is the attitude: encourage them to make full sentences (ex.: at least "yes, I'm there" instead of a simple "yes", unless this "yes" is a marvellous melisma). On the next lessons, encourage them to not copy you or the previous student but invent their own answer.

If someone doesn't want to cooperate or seems in a bad mood, try to make him smile: change your intonation and take the Darth Vader voice for example, or shout "Martin, where are you?" through the classroom or take the attitude of an old lady and sing with a terrible voice: "I think I see you, but I'm not sure, I forgot my glasses, please tell me if you are there.", etc. But don't insist too much at the beginning otherwise you may block him forever (at least for the rest of the course).



You can also play this game just for training (without purpose): sing anything to someone and get a response.

NB: using this game as a warm-up you have to go far into intention, alternating very serious propositions with very crazy ones as the aim here is to free the minds and develop imagination. To focus on this last point, it is sometimes interesting to give always the same material, I mean to produce always the same question, and to observe the diversity of answers in relation with this question.

Also, remind them that their response can be only percussive (without singing), or you can require to answer with movements also (either in silence (movements only), either with a sound). Adding movements helps to connect the sound to the body, and it helps fighting against shyness. I repeat myself but you can add movements in any exercise.

### 3.1.4 Repeat-After-Me game

This exercise can be done freely (without a pulsation) or you may want that everybody stamps the beats (left foot, right foot) or claps it with 2 fingers (to not be too loud). Then, you start singing a short phrase and everybody repeats this phrase. Then the first person to your left sings another phrase, everybody repeats and so on. If you are working with a pulsation, the propositions and their repetition should match the beat. The proposed phrase can be a melody or a rhythm, it can contain words or abstract sounds only (even with extended technique) => open your mind to open your students' mind.

After warm-up, this exercise can be used with parameters to prepare to focus on a particular skill: fixed melodic scale, fixed time signature, fixed rhythm cell, fixed notes, etc. You can even decide to fix all except dynamics for example: this is an excellent exercise to remind that *mf* is not the only way to produce a sound: use *ppp* to *fff*, crescendo/decrescendo, sudden changes, then introduce legato/staccato/marcato, accents, even voice colour change and all musical elements which existence is often forgotten by the students.

Another point I wanted to mention is that at the beginning, some children will keep silence when you ask them to improvise: don't shake them ! Just move on to the next students and sometimes come back to them. Finally, they will start opening the mouth and saying something as "I don't know" => ask them to say it in a musical way. If necessary, insist a little bit and if they still do not want to sing it, just take this "I don't know" sentence as a new material for improvisation and ask his neighbours to sing this phrase. From time to time, come back to the mute child and ask him to sing "I don't know". If he still refuses to make a sound, come closer to him and just ask: "ok, now I would like you to do just a simple sound, any sound: can you please sing one note, only one ?" If necessary, ask one of his friends to sing one note, then everybody sings this note. Then ask him again: "Now it's your turn." Insisting a little bit, you will get a sound in most cases => be very enthusiastic and ask everybody to sing this same sound. Now turn back to the child and with great enthusiasm, say: "That was great, now can you sing 2 sounds please ?" and everybody repeats the 2 sounds. Then ask other children to make 2 sounds, and from time to time, come back to the ex-muted child to check he is now a volunteer. In a few minutes, you can even ask him to come in the middle of the circle and show an example that everybody will repeat. In most cases, he will finally do it. Take care not to

encourage more than necessary: his attitude is now just normal. Putting someone in evidence by over-congratulating him can make his shyness appear again and he may return to silence.

### 3.1.5 Passing sounds

All in circle, imagine you are passing a virtual ball to your neighbour, but this ball is a complex sound (lasting between 2 and 5s, based on extended techniques) with an associated free movement. The movement and the sound must stop when the “ball” is caught by the neighbour. The neighbour who catches the ball should start immediately with the same sound as the other terminated (as near as possible) and make it evolve while turning and passing it to the next person.

Of course, all these exercises can be varied with your own rules.

## 3.2 Connecting to beat and rhythm

For all exercises that focus on rhythm, make sure that everybody can feel the pulsation and be a part of the process (not isolated) => placement is very important: stay grouped all together, sit in circle or stand up in line.

### 3.2.1 Feel-the-beat

If you have enough place, remove all the chairs of your room and ask everybody to walk around at the same tempo, not too fast (otherwise, ask them to remain at their place and stamp). On each beat (always stamped), all students produce a short sound (any sound) and change it each time (changing pitch, syllable, colour, dynamic, etc.). From this basis, imagine different situation such as:

- divide the class into 2 groups: one singing first beats, and the other second beats.
- Same using a 4-beat measure with 3 or 4 groups: one group can perform beats 1 and 2, another 2 and 3, another 3 and 4, etc. any combination can be used, even on more than 4 beats.
- To gain in autonomy, instead of making physically separated groups, if all students are in circle or in line for example, alternate one in the first group, the second in the second group, and so on.
- With the whole group unified, ask them to sound on upbeats only.
- Divide again the class into several groups, some performing beats, other upbeats, etc.

Note that in this exercise, improvisation seems to be very limited. Moreover, while students are focusing on keeping upbeats in place, they are not thinking about changing sounds anymore, and this is the heart of this practice: ask them not to focus on rhythms but to focus on changing sounds. Keeping the beats will then become organic: if they have to perform on beats 2 and 3 for example, they will feel it and not count anymore. Ask them to be very imaginative in the way they change their sounds (as we’ve seen before, you can limit the parameters: change pitch only, dynamics only or syllables only, etc.)

### 3.2.2 Stay-in-the-beat #1 - Individual

Use the Repeat-After-Me game with phrases made of rhythm only, you can add constraints such as using only patterns that were studied in previous lessons, using 6/8 or 3/4 time signatures, etc.

Also, rhythms can be done with all body parts, mouth drumming, Kodaly syllables or any scat sound.

The point is to keep the beat: no time for thinking, just act when it's your turn to provide a rhythm.

### 3.2.3 Stay-in-the-beat #2 - Collective

Everybody stands up in line, one behind the other, and stamps the same pulsation (alternating feet). The one at the back is the leader and provides a short rhythmic cell that propagates to the others all along the line. Everybody has to repeat the cell until it is replaced by another cell coming from behind. Ask them not to stop their sound to listen what's arriving, and to sing the new cell only when they are sure they got it and the person immediately behind them is performing it.

When the leader's cell is sung by about a quarter of the people in the line ahead, the leader provides another cell that superimposes upon the first one (continuing its progression towards the head of the line), and so on. Doing so, you will get a 4-layers rhythm. Everybody has to maintain the beat and keep the cells well synchronized. The leader has to provide clear samples and keep the beat when performing a new cell.

NB: it's interesting to play with rhythm patterns only, but from time to time the leader can also provide melodies or strange sounds, as long as it can be synchronized over the beat.

If you want to complicate a little bit the exercise, you can replace the stamping by asking your students to put an arm on the shoulder of the person ahead and softly beat the pulsation with the fingers: if someone is not precise, the person ahead will be disturbed and will have to fight to keep the beat anyway.

### 3.2.4 Add-one-beat game

On a pulsation given by a metronome (not too fast, around 60), the first child performs 1 single beat of rhythm (ex.: 1 quarter note, 2 eights, 1 triplet or 4 sixteenth), everyone immediately repeats, the 2<sup>nd</sup> one immediately performs the same rhythm and adds another beat, everyone repeats the two beats, the 3<sup>rd</sup> one performs the first 2 beats and adds a 3<sup>rd</sup> one, and so on, if someone makes a mistake, start again from one beat. At the beginning, you can limit the choice to 2 elements: a quarter note and 2 eights for example. With more advanced pupils, you can work in 6/8, with rhythms such as 3 eights, sicilienne, duolet, or irregular divisions.

This simple exercise may be interesting to develop memory, but its real goal is to enable the children to easily manage the beat division in 2, 3, 4... and to change from binary to ternary without thinking about it, just by imitating.

This is one important point I wanted to stress: in this exercise, improvisation is just limited to adding a beat (i.e. choosing a new beat division among the ones proposed). So we cannot really speak about "improvisation" but more about "selection". However, this is already a first step into proposing

something new. Then I wanted to mention a fact: this kind of exercise, I mean performing a succession of learnt rhythms, can be done in a usual way: the teacher writes a sequence on the blackboard and the pupils perform it: this is really efficient but pupils are “passive”.

A less conventional way is to write several rhythms on the board, and the teacher (or better: a student) shows which rhythm to perform (be careful to keep the beat when showing, ex.: show on the 1<sup>st</sup> beat, they perform on the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat, show on the 3<sup>rd</sup> beat, they perform on the 4<sup>th</sup>, etc.)

And finally a more unusual way and maybe more interesting would be to do so: ask one student to “improvise” a sequence with the rhythms written on the board (he can perform them in any order) and ask another student to show in real-time on the board which cell is being performed. In this situation: 2 students are working at the same time but in a different way: the first one is training to perform rhythms correctly, the second one is training to recognise visually what he hears. You can even put an “error cell” on the board, so that when the performer does a rhythm that is not written (ex. 2 sixteenth and an eight instead of a regular triplet), the listener can designate the “error box” to tell he noticed there was an error.

The conclusion of that is:

Always ask yourself how the traditional exercises can be done in an innovative way where the students are more active. By saying that, I don't mean that traditional exercises must be forgotten, it's always good to read rhythms on music sheets but improvisation can lead to another approach that may help to feel the things differently and where the pupils get more involved. And that's a good point for their understanding and their evolution.

### 3.2.5 The mad machine game

On a given beat (can use a metronome or people not performing), the first performer produces a repetitive sequence of sounds that may come out from a strange machine (can use the extended technique). This sound can be accompanied by a repetitive movement. A second performer comes to join him and adds his own repetitive sequence to the machine. This new sequence can last the same number of beats (for the first games, it is better and easier that you fix the number of beats) or may have a different length (requires more concentration and more skills). Then a third person joins the group, and so on, until all the pupils are a part of this terrible machine. Then, you (or a remaining pupil) are responsible for the tempo and you can change it as you like, slow down until it stops or accelerate until the machine becomes mad and explodes.

Be aware that if there are many people to take part in the game, it may become tiring for the first performers. Then you should build 2 machines or more in parallel, all on the same pulsation. Before doing this game, you can also speak about stamina and fragility of the voice: the performers have to be aware that they will have to produce the same sound for a long time, so they should choose comfortable sounds/movements/positions.

Remind them to introduce silences in the sequences (the more they are, the more silence should be used not to saturate the sound space): for example, one can perform the first 2 beats only and remain silent for the next 6. Also remind them to be imaginative: nobody told that the first sound of the sequence should be on the first beat...

### 3.2.6 Circle/Loop Songs

Discussed on the next page.

## 3.3 Developing the ear, understanding the modes and scales

### 3.3.1 Free melodic improvisation

A cappella, the student improvises a free melody in a predefined system: tonal (major/minor), atonal, modal, pentatonic, etc. depending on what you are studying and the level of complexity you want. You can also add rhythmic constraints such as to fit in a predefined time signature, to use a fixed rhythmic cell, etc.

If your ear is trained enough, you can add chords on the piano to accompany the melody being created but this must not disturb the performer: in this exercise, the aim is to let the student lead freely his melody. In next exercises, it will be the contrary: the student will have to fit in the harmony you decide.

### 3.3.2 Psalmody

Take a short text, preferably a poem with a fixed number of syllables or stresses, and ask the student to psalmody the text along the chords you are giving to him. At the beginning, you may use a limited number of chords and play them before, afterwards, you can introduce unexpected chords on stressed syllables and the students have to adapt in real time.

It's preferable that when playing the chords on the piano, the soprano moves as little as possible otherwise the singer may always sing the soprano note. A way to avoid that temptation is to provide big arpeggios all over the keyboard instead of simple chords.

Also note that this exercise is different whether the student knows the chords in advance or not. In the first case, he can feel and anticipate the notes he's doing (more efficient to develop inner hearing and anticipation). In the second case, he has to react immediately (more efficient to develop listening and adaptability).

### 3.3.3 Ground

You play an ostinato on the piano and the student improvises a melody that must match the harmony (of course, you can have any other constraints you want). You can use simple ostinati such as the popular C-Am-F-G or famous grounds such as the one from Pachelbel's *Canon* or the 4 chords of the *Lamento della Ninfa* by Monteverdi. This one is interesting because it's in 3/4 (fight against the supremacy of 4/4 !) and you can play beautiful recordings to your students so they can listen to how it is possible to tell a dramatic story with stresses and silences based on only 4 chords.

Also, you can go further by giving a text to the student and ask him to sing it in a theatrical way on this ground. It can be a regret letter or a dramatic theatre extract as in Monteverdi's piece, or

funnier, just take a formal administrative letter that you received or a newspaper article, and listen to how the harmony can give a text a new tone.

NB: you can also use jazz chords or a blues sequence, but this is more specific (see later, about cultural frame).

### 3.3.4 Feeling the music, inflexion of the melody

To enable the students to feel the tonic and the dominant, you can use what we call the “Finish-The-Song” game: start to sing a melody (may exist – folk tunes are excellent samples - but preferably unknown by the students), stop in the middle and ask your student to finish it. For example, if your melody stands for 12 bars, sing the first 8 bars, and the students add 4 more bars. Then they should arrive at a conclusion, everybody should feel that the melody is over. Afterwards, you may remove middle parts such as bars 5 to 8 for example. Then the student has to provide a material that is the continuation of the previous one but stops on a dominant or leads to a pre-existing conclusion.

Then, ask your students to collaborate: one starts a melody (4 bars for ex.), another continues the next 4 bars, another one continues the next 4 bars, and so on. Focus on the unity of the complete melody: encourage them to take into account the previous ideas, to feel and take responsibility for their role: do they have to build an introduction, go further into a development or bring to a conclusion ?

### 3.3.5 Circle/Loop Songs

One singer starts to sing a repetitive cell of 2, 4 or more measures. Another adds another repetitive phrase that matches the first one (synchronous), then a third singer and a fourth one. Then one after the other, singers can change their cell to a new one, or you can replace already singing people by new singers that create new patterns, so the global scheme is evolving and once all singers have been replaced by new ones you should hear a completely new pattern, maybe in a new key.

NB: When a pattern is clearly established, you can also ask a soloist to freely sing above all.

If you have high level students, you can mix metrics, for example, when you have a group singing in 4 beats, you can ask new singers to provide a repetitive cell in 3 beats. Or you can mix the tempo also, for example new singers enter in a new pulsation that is 2 beats for 3 previous beats.

Remarks:

- This exercise can lead to complex rhythmic patterns and can be done with percussive rhythms only.
- Be aware that it may be a little bit exhausting to always repeat the same phrase, so change the singers regularly.
- If you like technology, you can also bring a loop pedal: teenagers will love to work with that !
- If you want to listen to excellent loop songs, you can listen to Bobby Mc Ferrin’s *Circle Songs* album.

### 3.3.6 Building a canon

On a predefined ground of 4 chords played on the piano, a first student performs a melody and repeats it always, then another one adds his own melody and repeats, then a third one. Once all of them are singing, stop and make the first one sing alone, then the second one, then the third one. These 3 phrases put next to the other form a single melody that all the class may learn by repeating these 3 parts. Once the entire class is able to sing this new song in a row, make them sing it in canon, first with the chord ground, then without. When removing the piano, can you still hear the harmony ? Is it a good canon (where each phrase fills the harmony) or not (phrases too similar) ? Check with the students how it could have been better, for example, if all 3 phrases contain the same note on a strong beat, change this note in some of them to complete the chords.

Note that the middle section of this exercise (make everybody sing) is optional and once all 3 voices have entered, you can immediately remove the piano and check if it is a good canon or not.

The aim of this exercise is to encourage students to detect and fill the harmonic gaps: while adding a melody, they should avoid notes already sung by the previous voices. At the beginning, this exercise may require that each performer waits for 2 or 3 rounds before entering, so they can listen carefully and set up an interesting melody. This is less spontaneous, but efficient for the goal to achieve. Also, if the performers are used to sing in a choir, it will be easier if you put an alt, a tenor and a bass together than 3 basses for example.

### 3.3.7 Auto-harmonization

Take a well-known song, with a known and fixed harmony and ask the students to harmonize it while singing. A lot of choirs do that naturally when singing "Happy Birthday" to one of their member. Depending on the level of the choir, you may have chords on the last 2 notes only, or on the last 6 notes but very rarely from the beginning. You can try that with pop songs also such as *The Lion is dead tonight* and so on.

## 4 Going deeper into music education

### 4.1 Working around an existing melody

By working around an existing melody, you can develop different skills and involve many levels of difficulty, from very formal exercises to free development of personality. For example, you can ask your students to:

- Embellish it (you can even specify the style: Medieval descant, Renaissance gloses, Baroque diminutions and embellishments, Classical cadenzas, Jazz extension, Pop song interpretation, etc.)
- Make variations on it (make your students listen to the infinite number of “Variations” pieces, including the famous *Ah vous dirais-je maman/Twinkle twinkle little star/Morgen kommt der Weihnachtsmann* - variations by Mozart, but foremost by JC Bach)
- Add a melody above or around it (you can be inspired by the descants often sung by English choirs above congregation part during services)
- Transform it to a free contemporary object (stretch the sounds, change pitches or rhythms, sing one note over two to create a new melody, etc.)

### 4.2 Studying different aesthetics

Most of the exercises described below require to have prerequisite knowledge of the different musical styles. Using improvisation when studying a musical aesthetic enforces the comprehension of this aesthetic: after having pointed out the main characteristics of the studied style, ask your students to improvise a song that corresponds to this style. If the answer proposed does not exactly meets the required characteristics, explain why and show precisely what the wrong elements were. Little by little, they will integrate the style.

#### 4.2.1 Reflecting a musical genre or cultural frame

When listening to music, most students are able to identify the genre or the country where it comes from. You can use improvisation to make them feel the characteristics of these kinds of music. For example, you can ask your students to sing a melody in ways such as:

- World music: local Folklore, Zulu, Japanese No theatre, Chinese songs, etc.
- Occidental Art Music: Gregorian chant, Spanish early music, French baroque music, German romantic music, atonal music, American repetitive music, etc.
- Blues, Jazz, Rap, Techno and other pop music (there, you should play the chords on the piano, particularly for Blues or Jazz, it’s helpful).

#### 4.2.2 Understanding a composer’s style

Some composers have a strong signature that can be identified and reproduced. More advanced students, particularly if they attend analysis or harmony courses, should be able to imitate Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, and so on. After studying the main characteristics of a composer, ask your students to invent a short melody that may have been written by this composer. Bach can be even more developed: improvisation of a toccata, a fugue theme, an invention, etc.



Hereafter is a detailed example with a style that does not require advanced skills and that can be realized with the whole class: Arvo Pärt's tintinnabulum style.

Sing a A minor chord for example, and at your sign, the singers should choose from 3 options:

- continue to sing the same note they are singing now,
- move to another note of the same chord (A minor here),
- make silence !

Everybody should sing in homorhythmy: you decide alone about the length of the notes (uses long notes as well as short notes successions). Also, tell the singers that they can keep the same option for many beats, even keep the same note for 10 beats if they like.

After everybody has understood what the tintinnabulum is (moving inside the same chord), add a 4<sup>th</sup> option: move up or down to the next diatonic note of the scale. So the singers now have 4 options:

- stay on the same note,
- move to another note of the same chord,
- make silence,
- move up or down to the next diatonic note of the scale (designed as 4<sup>th</sup> option below).

This is interesting to understand what a chord is and what we call foreign notes. But then, the result can be a little bit confusing because it depends on chance: if everybody goes to a foreign note at the same time, it doesn't work. For a better effect, only one foreign note should be introduced at a time, so you have to fix who or when to go to a foreign note. This can be done in 3 different ways at least:

- The easiest one (suitable for children): everybody is performing tintinnabuli except the one you designated. This one performs the 4<sup>th</sup> option alone (moving conjointly from one note to the other, up or down).
- The intermediate one (improve reactivity): same as before but you can ask a new singer to go to the 4<sup>th</sup> option mode at any time. When designating a new person, the previous one should go back to choices 1, 2 or 3.
- The most complex but certainly the more interesting (excellent to develop attention and group cohesion): same as before, but here you don't decide anything: it is the singer being already in the 4<sup>th</sup> option who designate who will come after him. Eventually, you can set a predefined order before the performance to be sure that everybody has this role once, but it's up to the performer to decide how long he wants to move up/down the scale and when he wants to hand over.

To enrich the harmony, you can decide to have 2 people at the same time in the 4<sup>th</sup> mode (more than 3 may result in a too complex harmony).

Then you just have to take care of the legato and to add a latin text as a support and you are ready to perform a new world premiere by Arvo Pärt. Performing this exercise regularly will improve the quality of the improvisation and is an excellent training for all ages. At the highest point, singers will not only perform notes "by chance" but will have the intention to build real melodies and beautiful dissonances.

NB: This exercise may be tiring =>remind the singers that they need to breathe and that there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> option for that.

## 5 Developing musical sensitiveness, imagination, mind opening

### 5.1 Developing engagement and expression

#### 5.1.1 Working with a text

Take any text (theatre, poetry, or more unusual such as official announcement, application letter, review, newspaper article...) and sing it in an operatic way, recitative or aria.

You can also write expressions on pieces of paper and put them in a hat. Each student will take a paper and sing the text according to what is written on a paper: with love, with anger, with fear, and so on.

#### 5.1.2 Working with sound only

More and more, contemporary music requires non-conventional use of the instruments. Voice has a lot of expressive possibilities, including the possibility to transform the sound with extended techniques. Ask your students to explore all the sounds they can produce with their mouth: blowing, whistling, noising, crackling, singing overtones, etc. And for a deeper exploration, focus on one expression at a time: for example, you can find dozens of ways of blowing. Another example: starting from singing a simple "O", transform it with extended techniques, modifying vowel, tongue or larynx position, creating overtones, turning to a full noise sound, and then progressively back to a normal "O". Depending on the content of your lesson, this kind of exercise can be done during the warm-up, with the whole class.

Ask your students to create a vocal sound and to develop it with its own story. This story can be very abstract (the sound spreads from North to South and turns from white to red for example) or very concrete (ex.: the sound is put into a washing machine – then, the students must not imitate the noise of a washing machine but imagine how their sound can be transformed by being inside a running washing machine: rolling, wet, metallic, ...).

Working on sound transformation has several benefits: it opens the mind, it helps to discover new and sometimes unknown skills, but also, it helps people to develop opinions and clear ideas about what they are doing: when playing a score, even very "classical", performers must not only play notes but express their own understanding of the music. By transforming a sound, they are expressing themselves. Thus, it may be interesting to ask your students to explain before the performance the main idea they will develop, and when they have finished, to ask them how their idea evolved. You can also ask the students who were listening to say what they felt (be aware that you can spend hours discussing...)

#### 5.1.3 A musical conversation

Ask 2 or 3 students to make an improvised musical sketch, each one responding to the proposition of the other, with him or against him, alternating or together at the same time. Here also, it can be:

- fully abstract (just reacting to propositions, ex.: A does a loud rising glissando => B does a loud rising glissando also, or a sweet one, or a falling glissando or makes small glissandi, etc.)

- or very concrete (following a linear story). In this case, you can also provide them with an idea for a short story such as: "You have bought a DVD player, but it doesn't work, you bring it back to the shop, imagine the end of the story and play the scene by singing without words." After the play, ask the others to say what they understood about the story. The story itself has no importance, but they should be able to say if the seller was understanding or ironic or angry for example. Then you can study how the music can express human feelings by listening to pieces such as *Iris dévoilée* by Qigang Chen. You can also make them listen to some cartoon soundtracks, especially from Disney's *Silly Symphonies*.

The aim of this exercise is to collaborate and build something together, however, you may see the apparition of leaders and followers => make sure that leaders can also listen to the others and that followers can also be leaders sometimes. To manage that case, you can perform this small exercise: designate the leader, ask him to sing a sustained "A" with slow pitch variations within one tone only (use microtones) and vowel colour variation (from guttural to clear), then ask the others to follow the variations and keep a perfect unison with the leader (same pitch, same colour). When the performance is satisfying, choose a new leader and play again this game. When everybody has been a leader, tell them that now all of them are leaders and followers at the same time, and starting from a perfect unison, ask them to create successive dissonances and perfect unisons. The interesting point is when they will try to go back to a perfect unison after the dissonance. Make sure that this unison is really perfect and fully reached before they develop a new dissonance. At the beginning, it may take a while before reaching a perfect unison => ask them to manage so that dissonance and unison alternate every 10 seconds (that means perfect unison should be reached within 10 seconds). This kind of exercise is excellent for developing listening and precise pitch hearing.

#### 5.1.4 Improvising from a non-musical element

The following games can be played with a soloist, or with several people at the same time (up to 6 persons is manageable) to create a kind of short musical landscape or haiku (that lasts between 1 and 2 minutes). One interesting point here is to let the performance live alone:

- performers must feel the global form of a musical piece (start/development/stop).
- they must be aware of the density (silence/simplicity/complexity)
- they must be aware of the vertical space (grouped around the same pitch/empty space between lowest and highest sound/well-balanced distance between the different layers)
- they must find their place in the texture and have the will to bring out their voice when they feel it may be interesting (or not), sometimes being the focus point, sometimes in the background.

##### 5.1.4.1 Expressing ideas from a single word

Write words on papers (think of any kind of word "bee", "flute", "anger", "stuttering", "joke", "perhaps", etc. according to the level of maturity of your students), put them in a hat and let your students take one and improvise according to this idea. At the beginning, you can all work with the same word, and before performing, discuss together what to express: Ex. "perhaps" means hesitation, unwilling, don't know the way, not constant, abort => can be transferred to musical ideas such as not loud, no big attack, waves around a note, repetition of the first notes of a phrase and changing the last ones, etc.

#### 5.1.4.2 Expressing ideas from a picture

Show a picture of an abstract shape to your students and ask them to express a musical idea in relation with this picture. You can use paintings by famous artists such as J.Pollock, P.Klee, M.Rothko, V.Kandinsky, etc. The music can express a feeling, the texture or the movement used by the painter, etc. =>Try different points of view.

## 5.2 Using scores as a support

Using a score that requires improvisation or adding improvised parts on a score can help the singers to become more responsible when singing in the choir.

### 5.2.1 Adding improvisation to standard scores

You may know *Immortal Bach* by Knut Nystedt where a Lutheran choral harmonized by JS.Bach is sung in a contemporary way by holding some notes to create new harmonies. You can use the same idea with a lot of pieces as long as they are homorhythmic. Don't hesitate to invent your own rules.

Ex.1: *O bone Jesu* by Ingegneri: each singer starts independently with the first note, then starts again and sings the two first notes, then the 3 first notes, etc. and wait on the last note of the first phrase until everyone arrived there (idea from *Kör ad lib* vol.1 - G.Eriksson). Then you can sing the rest of the score in a normal way. In that interpretation, the point of interest for the singers is not only to stay in tune, but also to feel if the note they are singing is interesting or not among the rich polyphony, if it should be put in evidence or not, if it should last a long time or not.

Ex.2: You can also sing a simple folk tune in unison and ask the singers to sometimes hold notes for 1 to 3 seconds more with a 'morendo' applied on it. This adds an aura of mystery to the tune. Remind the singers to not hold notes too often (the melody must be heard) and to sustain other notes than the most obvious ones...

### 5.2.2 Contemporary notation that requires improvisation

Some scores contain contemporary notation that requires improvisation such as:

- Notes tank: each singer chooses the notes he wants among the proposed ones
- Random cells: the performer has to choose which bar he will play next (such *Musikalisches Würfelspiel* were already defined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we have some examples by CPE Bach, Haydn or even Mozart)
- Free pitch: only the rhythm is indicated on the score
- Free duration: notes are written in order but length is free/approximate
- Individual tempo: each singer sings the written part but at his own tempo
- Free number of repetition: each singer chooses how many times he will repeat the bar before going to the next bar.

### 5.2.3 Graphical scores

Graphical scores were particularly developed in the sixties, by composers such as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Murray Schafer for the most famous.

Studying a graphical score is of interest for developing reflection and imagination. If not indicated on the score, the student has to find how to interpret the drawing. He must not only focus on each sign, but also have a global view of the shapes: which elements are similar, what is their relation, etc. Also, he must try not to have a linear and rational view of the scheme but think more abstractive.

I'd like to mention Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*: one of the biggest graphical score (193 pages) and also Cathy Berberian's *Stripsody* that has a big success with children !

### 5.3 Soundscaping

I use this term to define a group improvisation where the group only reproduces the material given by the conductor. So there, only the conductor improvises (then it's interesting that the conductor is a student) and the singers just have to be convinced of what they are doing (already a huge work for some of them). Note that Soundscaping works really well with large choirs (I've experienced up to 250 singers).

In Soundscaping, the conductor has 2 tools to control the choir:

- Giving sound samples directly to the singers, in real-time
- A few gestures (invent your own or be inspired by Soundpainting – see below), for example to indicate start/stop, cresc/diminuendo, accel/rallentando, or also for designing specific patterns that you will have predefined with the choir before the performance and that you can call back at any moment (ex.: when showing one finger, everybody shouts "Hello", when showing 2 fingers, the choir is ready to sing the first bars of Haendel's *Alleluia* from *Messiah*, etc.).

Giving sound samples to the singers can be done in 2 different ways:

- Stand in front of the choir (so everybody can see and hear you) and produce an audible sound or a clear movement (for example: stamp, rub your hands...). Then the entire choir will catch the information and perform it quite immediately.
- Move next to a singer that will listen to you first and reproduce the sample himself before it propagates all around. In this case, the sound spreads slowly from one singer to another and if you give a new material quite quickly, you can superimpose layers (as in the Stay-in-the-beat game #2, see above).

Note that in that case, if the choir forms a single group (or a single line around the audience), no border exists to limit the propagation of the samples => if you don't give new samples quite quickly, the last given sample may reach the whole choir (but this can be a deliberate effect).

If you are not used to manage the real-time, you can divide the choir in several groups (also you may want to separate SATB for example) and walk from one to the other to tell each group what to do. Then, you can have as many layers as you have groups, without worrying about propagation and time elapsing.

You can also divide the choir in 2 or 3 independent groups that will "soundscape" at the same time, each group being conducted by a different conductor. Then each of them manages his groups freely or interacts according to what he hears from the other groups (and if a conductor is not used to real-time management, he can divide his own group in several entities as explained above).

## 5.4 Soundpainting

Soundpainting is a registered concept and was developed by the American composer Walter Thompson in the 80s. In Soundpainting, the conductor is called the soundpainter and has only one tool to control the performers: gestures. These gestures are very codified and you can get into very complex phrases by combining them. So far, Walter has defined about 750 signs but nobody knows them all because some of them concern only other arts such as dance or theatre. There are 43 basic gestures but you can even achieve interesting improvisations with about 20 easy-to-remember signs only.

The rule is to sequentially say:

- Who (is concerned by the next indication)
- What (to do)
- How (to do it)
- When (performing)

Most of the SP gestures belong to one of these 4 categories.

Note that these signs are just able to indicate a way of performing and cannot tell exactly what to do as in Soundscaping (see above). Thus, the result is always unpredictable because everybody has to make choices: the conductor as well as the performers => your students can remain as performers, even if sometimes it's good for them to become soundpainters too.

Here are basic signs you can use easily:

- **Whole group/Rest of the group/Groups**
- **Play/Off immediately**
- **Enter/Exit slowly (within 5 seconds)**
- **Volume/Tempo/Level faders**
- **Long tone/Hit/Pointillism**
- **(With) Extended Techniques/Air sounds / Speak / Whistle**
- **Pitch up/down:** 1 tone or half tone.
- **Point to point:** free improvisation while you are pointed at.
- **Relate to:** this one is interesting, because a performer (A) is put in relation with another one already performing (B), and the performer A can choose what the content of this relation is: exact synchronization with B, free imitation of B, opposition, accompaniment, abstraction, etc. More precisely, this relation is like a love story: the relation between the two performers can be simple or complex, harmonious or difficult, and this story can evolve. The performer A must have clear intentions in his mind to tell the story.
- **Freeze/Stab Freeze**
- **Synchronize:** interesting to develop global listening.
- **Minimalism:** repetitive cell based on a common pulsation.
- **Shapeline:** the performers interpret the movements of the soundpainter => here it may be interesting that a student becomes the soundpainter, to see how moving his body can have an impact on the sound.

## 6 Conclusion

I've presented you different ways of using improvisation in music education. Too many ways in fact but maybe you could find out at least a few ideas that suit you. Anyway, this workshop was just a starting point to open the minds and show the path, now it's up to you to go further in the subject: adapt these ideas to your audience and invent your own ways of using improvisation: when preparing a lesson, just ask yourself "What is the aim of the course and how can I use improvisation to reach this goal?".

Be careful not to try too many exercises too quickly: just start with one exercise that you will use for several weeks until the students are comfortable with it. Also, don't forget to set a frame and focus on the goal of the exercise: is it to develop harmonic hearing, the feeling of the pulsation, an aesthetic knowledge, expression, creativity? Perform this exercise until you think the aim has been reached. Of course, from one lesson to the other you can make the exercise evolve a little bit, add new constraints, change the parameters or the subject, but keep in mind that practising and practising again the same exercise will help the students to be more confident and more imaginative.

Also, trust the group emulation: of course some people will have poor ideas, but certainly others will have great ideas (maybe greater than yours!). And when someone provides a "good" response, use it as a stimulus for other people: explain to them why this was a "good" proposition and organize a battle, a battle of improvisation. You can even organize teams and give points! Children love that and such challenges motivate them to do their best and beat the other team.

Don't forget that as a teacher you are responsible for the atmosphere of the group: be smiling and relaxed, always encourage, be convinced of what you are doing and don't hesitate to show your craziness to help your students to go beyond their shyness.

Finally, don't forget: a good lesson around improvisation must not be improvised!...

*PS: I would appreciate any feedback, tell me if I met your expectations or if I forgot or missed any subject. Also, as it was the first time I had to speak about that in English and for an international congress, I don't have a lot of resources to advise in foreign languages, so I'd be very happy to get some ideas if you have some. You can contact me by email: [stephan.nicolay@gmail.com](mailto:stephan.nicolay@gmail.com)*

*Thanks for coming and enjoy: Music is Life, Life is Music!*

## 7 Resources

Audio chord loops/tracks for improvising:

- Look for what is called “play-along” CD. These are instrumental tracks that can be used as a support for improvisation. Also, there are many books to teach jazz language that contain such discs at adapted levels such as Chop-Monster Jr (Alfred Publishing), How to play jazz and improvise vol.1 (Jamey Aebersold Jazz), Jazz improvisation: the goal note method (Kendor Music), 44 Warm-Up and Performance Studies for Jazz, Pop and Gospel Choirs (Schott Music), etc.
  - On Google, search for “improvisation loops” or “play along tracks” or “backing tracks”. Here is a very short list of websites you can find, some of them are not limited to jazz but also include full pop songs back tracks (teenagers will be happy to improvise on famous songs such as Guns’ *Knock on heaven’s door* ! And if they are stuck to the original, find and play other interpretations by various artists):
    - [www.wikiloops.com](http://www.wikiloops.com)(quite complex website, you can add/remove musicians from jam sessions, have a look at the help page first)
    - [www.guitarbackingtrack.com](http://www.guitarbackingtrack.com)
    - [www.sandiegoguitarlessons.com/iloops.htm](http://www.sandiegoguitarlessons.com/iloops.htm)
    - [www.jazzpracticeloops.com](http://www.jazzpracticeloops.com)
    - [www.freejamtracks.com/83-jam-tracks-for-guitar.html](http://www.freejamtracks.com/83-jam-tracks-for-guitar.html)
    - [www.lecoledurock.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=108](http://www.lecoledurock.com/wordpress/?page_id=108)
- Etc.

Some interesting vocal improvisers to listen to:

- |                             |                         |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| ▪ Romina Daniele            | ▪ Meredith Monk         |
| ▪ Bobby Mac Ferrin          | ▪ Lauren Newton         |
| ▪ Ella Fitzgerald           | ▪ Natascha Nikeprelevic |
| ▪ Joan La Barbara           | ▪ Maria Ratkje          |
| ▪ Emilie Lesbros            | ▪ Demetrio Stratos      |
| ▪ Phil Minton’s Feral choir | ▪ Michael Vetter        |

Some interesting books:

- *A Sound Education: 100 Exercises in Listening and Soundmaking*- Robert Murray Schafer: short and easy exercises to develop listening and sound making, a few of them require improvisation
- *Kör ad lib* (2 books) - Gunnar Eriksson (Bo Ejeby Förlag): many ideas of arrangement and improvisation around standard scores (included); can be used in rehearsal or for a concert performance. A workshop with G.Eriksson was released on DVD: *Le chœur en liberté* can be found at [www.cndp.fr](http://www.cndp.fr)

Graphical scores:

- Jeux musicaux – Guy Reibel (Salabert): short graphics to work on clusters, dynamics, etc.
- Chor aktuell (Gustav Bosse Verlag): a few graphical scores at the end of the book
- [www.notations21.net](http://www.notations21.net)
- Just google for images with keywords such as ‘graphical score’ or ‘contemporary notation’ or composer’s names such as Feldman, Stockhausen, etc. and you’ll find several samples.
- Also note this interesting analysis of a page of Cardew’s *Treatise*: [www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/picturesofmusic/pages/anim.html](http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/picturesofmusic/pages/anim.html)

Find all about SoundPainting, including DVD+workbooks by visiting [www.soundpainting.com](http://www.soundpainting.com)