

IMPROVISATION EXERCISES

by Jeffrey Chappell

The exercises numbered 1, 2, and 3 are the most powerful techniques for improvising in general. The others each focus on doing a specific assignment to build musical coherence. After you try each exercise, evaluate what benefit it had on your playing.

1. The most valuable thing is to play only when it feels like the right time to play. As an exercise for this, improvise a slow piece. Take your time, be the source of the music, and practice comfort. Be the driver of the music instead of feeling like you have to run to keep up with it.
2. Improvise with your eyes closed. Identify the difference that this makes in your experience.
3. For pianists, guitarists, string players, etc.—not for wind players, brass players, or singers: “say as you play”. Every time you play a note, speak or sing a syllable.
4. For all instrumentalists and singers: sing an improvisation. You can do this any time and any place that is suitable. You don’t need a practice session or even an instrument.
5. For instrumentalists but not singers: sing a phrase and then play it on your instrument. Perfect repetition is nice but not required. At least make the two phrases sound similar.
6. Make yourself play, or sing, twice each phrase that you improvise—as close to an exact repeat as possible. This is different from Exercise 5 because you will be repeating on one instrument, not alternating between two.
7. In case you fear sounding bad when you improvise, then try to play a really bad improvisation on purpose. You may find that it’s difficult to play a bad improvisation. That’s because your awareness makes it good. Also, doing things on purpose is more important than sounding good.
8. Do an atonal improvisation. It doesn’t matter what notes you play, only what rhythms you play. This is another way to counter your fear of sounding bad or your fear of making mistakes.
9. There are no mistakes in improvisation, but you can intend to do one thing and then do something else instead. If what you did wasn’t on purpose, then give it a purpose: repeat it, or develop the idea into a new part of the improvisation.
10. Take a composition and play the first two measures as written; improvise something in place of measures 3 and 4; play measures 5 and 6 as written; improvise something in place of measures 7 and 8; etc. Use some other number of measures instead if that fits the composition better.
11. Orbit around a single note in your phrase by playing that note and several notes above and/or below it, but always returning to that note.
12. Consciously incorporate silence into your improvisation. Tell yourself to stop occasionally, instead of feeling obligated to keep going constantly.
13. Do an improvisation on one note in a scale, creating the most interesting rhythm that you can. It’s not necessary to stay within one octave. After awhile, add one more note; then gradually add another, and another, etc., until you are using all the notes of the scale.
14. If you are improvising over a chord progression, hold the first chord for a long time. Improvise over that harmony until you feel totally comfortable with it. Then do the same with the second chord, the third chord, etc., through the whole progression. Afterwards, go back and play the entire progression in its proper time values while improvising over it.

15. Restrict your improvisation to the notes of a single chord. As an example, for a D major chord, improvise using only the notes D, F#, and A.
16. Play the same notes over and over but with different rhythms.
17. Play the same rhythms over and over again but with different notes.
18. Improvise the soundtrack to a story. As examples, this could be a fairy tale, or an improvised story that someone tells as you play, or your diary of what happened today.
19. Alternate opposing qualities. As examples, do an improvisation alternating staccato and legato, or high notes and low notes, or playing a lot with not playing much.
20. When you play a phrase that you like particularly, memorize it. Transpose it to all keys. Use it during your improvisations. It will become part of your vocabulary and personal style.
21. To build your sense of knowing where you are in the structure of a tune, play 4 measures and stop; play 4 more measures and stop; etc. Then do this with 8 measures, then 16, and then 32.
22. Play along with a chord progression, one note per chord, and on each successive chord make the note you play ascend by either a half or whole step to a note that blends with the chord. Do the same exercise with the notes descending.
23. In a progression, as one chord changes to the next, play the root of each new chord in your improvised melody. Repeat the exercise and do the same with the 3rd, or 5th, or 7th of the chord.
24. Train your rhythmic sense by playing notes only on the 1st beat of the measure. Do the same with the 2nd, or 3rd, or 4th beats. Do the same with the “and” count after beat 1, or 2, or 3, or 4.
25. Repeat a tune several times, each time with different embellishments of the melody. As examples, the embellishments might be repeated notes, or grace notes, or neighboring tones.
26. Make your phrase lengths irregular—some long, some short, some in-between.
27. Begin phrases on different beats in a measure.
28. Start each phrase with the last note of the previous phrase as a way to create a subtle sense of continuity.
29. Start each phrase with the last few notes of the previous phrase as a way to develop your melodic ideas.
30. Give each phrase an ending instead of wandering endlessly.
31. Pianists having trouble coordinating the two hands should practice two ways: by alternating the hands (hands never together); and by playing the hands simultaneously on the same rhythms (hands always together).
32. Take a stylistic inventory of the first four measures of a piece you know, identifying the key it is in, as well as the tempo, the meter, the rhythmic and melodic patterns of the notes, and the loudness and register of the sounds. Improvise something that sounds like that piece, using the same key, tempo, etc. Now you are improvising in the style of that composer.
33. Ask yourself how you feel right now and play the music that expresses that. Speak the truth through your instrument. When you finish, notice whether you feel different afterwards.

Overall, practice an attitude of approval towards what you play. Suspend judgment and enjoy the process of generating material. Make use of everything that happens, both intentional and accidental. Stay in the present, leave the past behind, and move toward the future.