

Jazz Improvisation for Classical Musicians

– Brad Millard

This article about improvisation may or may not grab your attention, but hopefully it will help some by exploding some of the myths about this appealing but potentially daunting art form. Its purpose is to attempt to stimulate and encourage those of you who wish to be able to improvise but lack the confidence to, or those of you who have dabbled in improvising and wish to be better. The field of improvisation to be discussed here is in the jazz and rock music areas.

Some years ago a school leaver auditioned for a place in a course at the Queensland University of Technology in the jazz genre. He played the two own choice works required of him, neither of which contained any improvisation. When asked if he improvised he replied with an emphatic “No – I just make it up as I go along”. His concept of improvising was somehow different from his concept of “making it up as I go along”, but of course they are essentially one and the same. In order to improvise proficiently, however, it is necessary to be equipped with certain skills and an appropriate knowledge base. I guess the “auditionee” referred to above felt he lacked the proficiency (and confidence) to be able to state that he could “improvise”, but there is no reason why he, and anyone else for that matter, can’t improvise well.

Of course, the term “improvisation” is a rather broad one – it refers to the process of acting in a spontaneous manner. ALL of us CAN and DO already improvise every day of our lives. When the phone rings and we answer it, we usually have no idea who may be calling. If it’s someone familiar to us, we act in a certain manner. If the person is unfamiliar, we act differently.

Either way, we “improvise” as we converse. We do in any conversation. If we are playing tennis and our opponent hits the ball towards us, we think and act very quickly. That is, we improvise our response to their having launched the ball our way.

Following this line of thinking, obviously there are countless areas of life where we think and act in a spontaneous fashion. Most of us are more comfortable with improvising in these sorts of areas because we are either confident in our ability or we don’t have a reputation to live up to and therefore are not afraid of failure. Therein lies the problem a lot of people face when wishing to improve their improvisation skills on a musical instrument. We are afraid of failure. It’s quite a natural and human thing to experience. Nobody likes to be humiliated or embarrassed, and publicly parading yourself leaves you susceptible to just that. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

It stands to reason that if we equip ourselves with the necessary skills needed in musical improvisation, we will feel much more comfortable with it, too.

What are the skills you need? Well, I’m assuming you can already play some notes on your instrument and have the basis of a reasonable technique. (Mind you, don’t wait until you can rattle up and down the instrument like a champion before you “get your feet wet” – you may never try. Playing only one note with rhythmic spontaneity is indeed improvising).

In my opinion, the first thing to do is to ensure you have an understanding and ability to play or sing in a stylistically appropriate manner. I have encountered many people who wish to be skilled improvisers without first being able to play the written melody/harmony with the right sort of feel. This requires much listening to those who are better than you are (both through recordings AND “live” situations). Practise trying to imitate the feel of someone who played, say, a swing tune – someone whose playing really appealed to you. Transcribing someone’s melody playing as well as solos is greatly beneficial. Practise scales and arpeggios in a style other than a classically oriented, “straight” fashion. For instance, try playing C Major in a swing style.

How do you do this in order to make it sound authentic? Well, for a start, the rhythm must be altered. Instead of playing evenly spaced notes, play the triplet-like rhythm that typifies swing music. (Playing swing quavers with a triplet rhythm is not strictly correct. Nor is dotted quaver, semiquaver) Then, play the scale slowly, with the second of each pair of notes emphasised. This is VERY important in achieving the right sort of feel, as emphasising the second of a pair of notes is a GENERAL rule in swing.

If you have a classical music background like me, you were almost certainly taught to emphasise notes ON the beat rather than OFF the beat as I am suggesting here. When you were just beginning on your instrument and struggling to play in time, your teacher probably would count aloud to try to keep you “in time”. He or she would probably say “ONE and TWO and THREE and FOUR and”. However, when playing a swing scale, you should think “one AND two AND three AND four AND.....”. As you can see, the “AND” of each beat is stressed. Initially, you should exaggerate this emphasis. Further down the track, when you are more comfortable with being able to do this naturally and without thinking too hard, you should consider how much

you should stress the “AND” note. This is based on musical taste and appropriateness for the particular musical occasion. Of course, this doesn't mean that one never emphasises notes on the beat in swing, but practising your scales in this way will help you feel immeasurably.

Like all your practice, make sure you do it slowly and with repetition. Isolate the problem areas – don't always go back to the beginning of the scale if you make a mistake. Start from just near where you made the mistake.

Anyway, how does any of this help you to improvise? Well, as I mentioned earlier, it's important to play with the right sort of feel when playing any sort of music, whether it be Brahms or Count Basie. Having formed the basis for authentic style, your improvisations will sound considerably better and you will develop more confidence as a result.

Jazz has a LOT in common with classical music. The harmonic foundation is similar in terms of general structure. Many chords used in jazz harmony today, which are regarded by some jazz aficionados as unique to their field, were actually used by “classical” composers 100 years ago. Many of the Romantic composers as well as French Impressionists used added note chords back then, as is evident from a study of their compositions readily available today. To have a complete understanding of what to do when improvising over a tune, it's important to have a thorough understanding of the harmonic structure and direction of a piece. All of this possibly still makes the prospect of learning how to improvise appear to be an insurmountable problem.

All right, let's simplify this stuff even more. Over every chord in every piece there's a scale which you can play which will sound good. In other words, the scale will work over the chord. For instance, if you encounter a C Major 7 chord, the scale of C Major (also called C Ionian Mode) will work beautifully. If you encounter a C7 chord, the scale of C Major with a Bb instead of B natural will work. (this scale can also be called F Major, but going from C to C).

A type of scale, which is an essential tool in improvisation, is called a MODE. If you have heard or read about certain modes and you think – “this is all Greek to me” – that's because it IS Greek. The mode names as we know them today are based on Greek words, the meanings of which have a logical similarity to musical modes.

To be strictly correct, a scale is a type of mode, not the other way around. An easy way to consider what a mode is, to think of the major scale (to begin with) as you know it, and then think of that scale commencing and finishing on a different degree of the original scale. For instance, instead of playing C Major from C to C, try playing C Major between D and D. This is called D Dorian Mode. C Major from E to E is called the E Phrygian Mode, and so on it goes. Each of the seven modes of the major scale has a Greek name. These are Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian and Locrian. It would be good if each mode's name was less of a mouthful for us, but tradition has dictated that these names remain.

Classical music can be analysed as having a certain form. You may be playing a piece, which you know to be in Ternary Form. You probably break this down further into conceiving it as ABA form. Within these sections, the music will pass through various keys (if diatonic). Underpinning all of this are chords. Each chord itself can be analysed. The progression of chords is called a chord progression (funnily enough!) Jazz is no different. It SOUNDS different because of the feel of the music, the rhythms, the combination of instruments and the treatment of the chords.

Many mainstream jazz tunes have the form AABA, which you could say is a type of Ternary Form. Often each of the A and B sections is 8 bars long. Therefore you only really need to learn 16 bars of music, as there is repetition of the A section evident. In classical music, the most common chord progression is called a Perfect Cadence. The most common chord progression in jazz is the ii-V-I progression. This means that in C major, the chords would be D minor7 to G7 to C major7. These are sometimes written differently – often as D-7 to G7 to C r . The modes, which are usually played over these chords, are D Dorian, G Mixolydian and C Ionian respectively. Closer inspection reveals that every note in each of these modes is in C major scale. Therefore, instead of thinking of each chord separately, it makes sense to think in the KEY of C major. This is a very useful tip when improvising. Where possible, THINK KEY, NOT CHORD. Supposing you encountered the chord progression G-7, C7, Fr . This is a ii-V-I progression in F major. Therefore, play in the KEY of F major over the top of this chord progression. This will work. In fact it sounds GOOD! Some notes will sound better than others will, but all are OK.

Following is an analysis of why this principle works. Instead of deriving the mode from the chord, we will derive the chord from the mode.

Here is D Dorian Mode:



Most chords are built in intervals of a third. Chords used in jazz often continue the building of thirds to form extended note chords; e.g. a C r 9 chord contains the notes CEGBD (1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th and 9th). A 13th chord contains the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th and 13th, though all notes won't necessarily be played by chord playing instruments when "voicing" the chord.

Adding one more 3rd on top of a 13th chord takes us back to the same note as the root of the chord. Let's form a chord from D Dorian mode. By counting the D as the 1st note and building up in 3rds, we end up with the notes DFAC, i.e., the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th notes of the mode. Playing these notes together results in the chord of D-7 (D minor 7). If we play the other notes of the mode, the E, G and B against this chord, it sounds fine to our ears. This is because in relation to the root (bottom note) of the chord, each of E, G and B is either a "major" or "perfect" interval, i.e., there is no real dissonance evident. If D Dorian mode HAPPENED to have an Eb instead of an E natural, this wouldn't work so well, as playing an Eb over the D will sound less pleasing to the ear. Well, to most ears anyway.

Look at G Mixolydian Mode:



By circling the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th notes to form the chord the mode implies, we end up with the notes GBDF. Played together, this forms a G7 chord. Check the other notes. Again, we find only major or perfect intervals against the root, G. So, G Mixolydian mode sounds fine played over a G7 chord. Note that the chord of G7 has an F natural, not F#, as it is derived from the key of C, not the key of G.

Finally, here is C Ionian mode:



By forming a chord from this we end up with CEGB which, played together, form a C r or C major 7 chord. The other notes have either a major or perfect relationship with the C, so again, no problems. With each of the above chords, the 4th CAN sound less pleasing than other notes, but it can still be used to great effect, depending upon how it's treated.

There are, of course, numerous other chord progressions in jazz. Some are more common than others; some are unique. But the principal of the above application can be used to determine what mode/scale and therefore what notes work when played over that particular chord. As mentioned, where possible, think key not chord. Sometimes, with certain chord progressions, you will be "effectively" playing in a few keys in quick succession, even though the tonic key is something different. The piece may therefore have effectively modulated, albeit briefly. Players of classical music do this all the time in their standard repertoire works, often without realising it. Classical musicians generally aren't required to improvise, as mostly all of the notes they play are printed on the page in front of them. It's just the nature of the beast. There are many, many more examples that could be discussed that we don't have the space for here, but one excellent resource to refer to and absorb is "The Jazz Theory Book" by Mark Levine, published by Sher Music Company copyright 1995. It's quite expensive (around \$70 - \$80), but well worth the expense.

Hopefully you will have gained something from reading this article, if only a desire and willingness to pursue this field further. Realise that classical, jazz and rock music have much in common. Think of these commonalities rather than thinking of it all as different and foreign. Try to find some other like-minded musicians who would like to get together and try some things out. Even if you get hold of a friend who just plays isolated chords for you on the piano or guitar, and you play the relevant modes over them, listening to which notes really appeal to your ear and musical taste. Try the modes of the ii-V-I progression. You CAN try these by yourself – by picking out the notes of each chord on a piano and holding down the sustain pedal while playing the modes over the top. Play-a-long recordings help many people and are an excellent resource. Transcribing solos (especially by ear) is very, very useful. In fact, by transcribing solos and imitating the feel, phrasing, inflections and tone of the masters means that you're sort of "sitting in" with their band, which can really give you a buzz and is also very helpful to your development.

Don't be frightened to give it a go. Don't place yourself in an unrealistic situation where you may be embarrassed or humiliated. Work your way up to being able to cope with more high-pressure situations, just as you would in your more familiar field of study. Improvising helps to encourage and cultivate your imagination, which can help your classical playing. Enjoying the artistic freedom and flexibility of playing jazz and rock styles can result in a most rewarding and satisfying experience. Hopefully you'll share in the joy this can bring.

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