

First Improvisation activities and ideas for teaching instrumental lessons in pairs and groups

Improvisation can strike terror into the beginner if applied wrongly. However, I have found that these activities break students gently into improvisation, whilst also developing other key skills along the way.

They can be used as a quick warm up or as an end of lesson treat when students have worked well in the lesson.

I use these 'games' for beginner Clarinet, Saxophone, and Flute students, however they could easily be adapted for any other instrument, though may require you to choose alternative, more suitable scales for your students. Keys suggested here are for players maybe having been learning for around 6 – 9 months. I use these suggested ones, as they feature on the grade 1 exam (ABRSM).

BAGPIPE / ATMOSPHERIC / HAUNTING IMPROVISATION ACTIVITY.

Clarinets; A harmonic Minor

Saxophones; D harmonic Minor

Flutes; E harmonic Minor

1. Get Students to play tonic note, for as long as they can (developing breathing and control). Try to get it really smooth with no bumps. Time them to see if they can 'beat' their previous record (if done before).
2. Play the minor scale in various styles; tongued, legato, staccato, swing etc, it's up to you! (it helps to initially play the scale notated in front of them). I have often been seen 'witchily' creeping around my CD player (the cauldron of course!) with younger students (to develop timing and expression, though they don't realise they are learning this!).
3. On a count of 4, one student plays the held tonic (drone) whilst student 2 plays the scale up and down (give a pulse first). The 'droner' must attempt to keep the tone good and stable for the duration of the scale, similarly the 'scaler' should attempt a reasonable speed to avoid the droner passing out!
4. Swap over.
5. Now encourage one student to 'mix the notes up' of the scale, whilst other student plays the drone, a quick demo is helpful here (get BOTH students to play the drone as you demonstrate, see which runs out of air first!). If they look terrified give them a 3 note riff to start them off and give them a demonstration.
6. Let the kids try, give lots of encouragement, assuring, that NOTHING can be 'wrong' in improvisation!
7. Once confident (maybe after you have done this exercise a few times over a few weeks), give a mood that you would like, e.g. a haunting misty lake, a funeral procession, a Scottish or Irish jig! Use your imagination!!!!

GROOVY BLUES IMPROVISATION

I have found that kids LOVE this exercise, and the natural 'jazzers' will really shine and come alive. Even the less confident kids really come on and gain confidence, though they may need more encouragement.

The 'walking bass' Ostinato encourages neat fingering on low F and E for Clarinets, and neat fingers over registers with saxes and flutes.

Suggested keys;

Clarinets; A Blues (A,C,D,D#,E,G,A Chalumeau register)

Saxes; D Blues (D,F,G,G#,A, C,D)

Flutes; E Blues (E,G,A,A#,B,D,E)

1. Play a 'walking bass' Ostinato descending, assuming each note is a minim (give a pulse first); Clarinets low A,G,F,E , Saxes D,C,B flat, A, Flutes E,D,C,B. Walk round the room as you play it to help keep time, and stop them panicking about their fingers!
2. Play the blues scale in unison, demonstrating it first, refresh any newer notes. Play each notes as semibreves, then as minims, and as crotchets, see how fast they can get before they get into a pickle! (this keeps it fun and light hearted!). Draw attention to the chromatic group, that bit is extra funky!
3. One student then plays the Ostinato walking bass, whilst the other plays the blues scale as minims, you can click fingers (or a third student) on every 2nd and 4th beat for added 'groove'! The clicker can be asked to switch to beats 1 and 3 on occasion to keep them on the ball.
4. Swap over!
5. Now it's time to 'mix it up'! Again, you can demonstrate by getting BOTH students to play the walking bass (give a pulse, and ask kids to listen to one another to keep time together). You can improvise a cool blues melody. Then get the kids to try. A couple of attempts each is best, and give positive remarks when they become more adventurous!
6. Further experimentation can be used later on, by shouting instructions through the improvisation, e.g. you may want the bass to do a funky staccato rather than legato, shout various dynamics and see how quickly they react. The possibilities are endless!

Other pair / group work activities you can try.....

For students fairly new to notation, get one to 'instruct' or 'conduct' the other. Give the instructee the sheet music (I suggest just one of the beginner tunes from their tutor books, using up to 5 notes). They must tell their partner the name of the first note THEN proceed to reel off the formula; up one, down one, down 2, stay the same etc. This helps both parties get used to seeing notation as a pattern or formula rather than the dreaded trap of only being able to read letter names! Of course this particular exercise doesn't concentrate on rhythm, just pitch.

On a similar theme 'walk' out a piece using floor tiles or even stairs (health and safety screams are penetrating even now!). Obviously it needs to be a fairly 'steppy' tune or little legs won't reach!

Put on a backing track to a piece your students are learning. Ask them to identify the metre, then beat one. Click or clap on one leg the main beats. With the other hand tap quavers. Count the quavers aloud; either 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & or the quavers 12345678. Go back to just tapping the crotchets and counting quavers in the head. Then shout out a number (or two or three even!) and they must tap that particular quaver, say 2 and 7. Your other students can do similar (on different numbers!) See who 'falls off' first!

Dynamics; Take a piece your pair / group are playing can they play it with all dynamics OPPOSITE to what are written? Can they play it together? One playing it as written and one the opposite?

Phrasing; Encourage students to identify the question and answer phrasing that most beginner pieces are built on. In pencil, mark in the breath marks (signifying the end of one phrase and the start of the next). Play the piece through with your student pair or group taking a phrase each aiming for a neat flow of melody, phrasing and tone.

Sight reading; using a business card or similar, ask one student to cover up the notes as their partner plays the piece. They should be covering up one or two notes BEFORE the other student plays them. This encourages the player to read ahead and the card mover to listen, respond, and relate to the notation.

Look out for further future tips and ideas at www.masquerade-music.co.uk in our free resources section in addition to our new and original sheet music for woodwind players.