

Building Better Improvisers

Dr. Russell Ballenger

Dedicating Class Time to Improvisation?

I know, I know - "But our concert is in a couple weeks and we need every bit of rehearsal time to clean up the ensemble sections." As educators, we have all felt the pressure of an upcoming concert or festival and although we know that improvisation is important, it is set aside in favor of correct notes and rhythms. However, if we fail to introduce improvisation as an integral part of jazz ensemble, then the jazz ensemble becomes a concert band with "swung" 8th notes. In dedicating only five minutes of your rehearsal time each day to improvisation, you will notice that not only are improvisations improving, but ensemble parts get better as well.

Improvisational skills and techniques help all students because they require open ears and active brains for listening and responding to each other. This is what music (especially jazz) is all about!

Also, make sure that your students are LISTENING to this music on a regular basis. Expose them to great jazz artists by having music playing as they are coming into and leaving rehearsal. Also, when possible, having the students listen to recordings of the pieces they are rehearsing or similar pieces in that same style. Here is a Spotify playlist made up of great recordings for your students to listen to:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/russballenger/playlist/1ZUnr6dVp2b1wjwU4dci5J>

5 Easy Ways to Work on Improvisation in the Classroom

These are in no particular order. Pick and choose the approach that works for you and your students.

1. Call and Response

Play a recorded drone pitch on speakers. Begin in a familiar key area such as B-flat. On top of this pitch, play or sing notes in the B-flat major scale and have your students sing it back to you. Once successful, have the students try to echo using their instruments. I like to start with the B-flat major scale, followed by patterns beginning on B-flat before branching out. You might also try playing a short jazz lick but teach it by adding one pitch at a time, similar to the game Simon.

Bb Drone: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyykREIO7r4>

Two-Note Patterns Beginning on Bb:



Three-Note Patterns Beginning on Bb:



Four Note Patterns Beginning on Bb:



Four Note Patterns Not Beginning on Bb:



Lick #1:



Lick #2:



2. Creating Rhythmic Interest

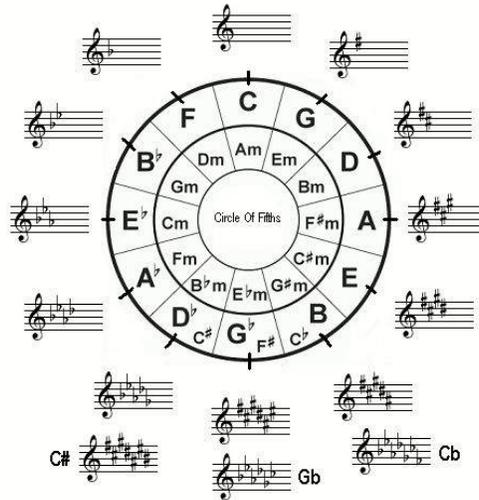
Learn a short pattern or lick and then displace the rhythms. Instead of starting the lick on beat 1, play it on beats 2, 3, and 4 or any of their upbeats. Try keeping the same notes, but change the rhythms completely. Think about adding/taking away syncopation. Have students write their own rhythms to try out!

Rhythmic Displacement:



3. Playing by Ear

Play a familiar melody such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Have the students analyze - What key are we in and what scale degree does the melody start on? Take the tune around the circle of fourths, playing it in all twelve keys. This is helpful for learning their major scales as well!



“Mary Had a Little Lamb”



Bb Major: 3 2 1 2 3 3 3 2 2 2 3 5 5 3 2 1 2



3 3 3 3 2 2 3 2 1

Lick #1:



g minor: 1 2 3 4 5 3 2 1 4 4 3 3 1

Simple Songs to Play By Ear:

Frere Jacques
 Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star
 Mary Had a Little Lamb
 My Country, 'Tis Of Thee
 Amazing Grace

Silent Night
 Star-Spangled Banner
 Row, Row, Row Your Boat
 Old MacDonald Had A Farm
 America The Beautiful

4. Melodic and Rhythmic Embellishment

Take a tune that the students have already learned and played by ear. Now let the students explore adding their own embellishments to the melody. It is not required that they stay within a key, and in fact, it is often best if there are no restrictions on “right and wrong notes” so that they can figure out on their own what sounds good and what does not. This can be done collectively as a class, or ask individuals to share.

“Mary Had a Little Lamb” with New Rhythms:



“Mary Had a Little Lamb” with Melodic Embellishments:



5. Simplifying Chord Changes

If you want to work on a specific set of chord changes as a class, I recommend starting with something simple like the blues. Have the class spell out the notes in each chord and find the 3rd and 7th of each chord. These two notes define the chord and we call them ‘guide tones’. If we can find smooth voice leading from one chord to the next throughout a tune using mostly 3rds and 7ths, we have created a “guide tone line”. The guide tone line helps us as improvisers highlight the chord changes. Once you come up with one or two guide tone lines, try to melodically embellish around them, still highlighting the chord changes as they go by. Try anticipating the chord changes by landing on a guide tone on the “and” of 4 in the previous bar.

Chords in a Bb Blues with Guide Tones in Bold:

Bb7:	Bb	D	F	Ab
Eb7:	Eb	G	Bb	Db
F7:	F	A	C	Eb

Bb Blues with Guide Tones:

The image displays three staves of musical notation for a Bb Blues progression. Each staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (Bb), and a common time signature (C). The first staff contains four measures: the first measure has a whole note chord with a flat sign below the staff, and the following three measures each contain a whole note chord with a flat sign below the staff. The second and third staves follow the same structure, each containing four measures of whole note chords with flat signs below the staff. The notation is consistent across all three staves, representing a standard blues progression in Bb major.

About the presenter:

Dr. Russell Ballenger is an Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Mary in Bismarck, ND, where he teaches low brass and directs the Jazz Ensemble. As an orchestral trombonist, Ballenger has performed with the Amarillo Symphony, Mississippi Symphony, Tuscaloosa Symphony, New Mexico Philharmonic, and currently holds the position of Principal Trombone with the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony Orchestra. He has performed with the Four Tops, played for the National Broadway tour of "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas: The Musical!," and traveled with Carnival Cruise Lines. Ballenger has had multiple articles published by the International Trombone Association. As a clinician, he has presented at Boise State, West Texas A&M, Brandon, and Indiana Universities. He holds degrees from Indiana University, the University of New Mexico, and the University of Alabama. www.russballenger.com