

Lesson 4: Practicing Improvisation

Featuring: Leo Blanco, Professor at Berklee College of Music

Improvisation is the art of composing instantaneously, based on melody, harmony and structure of a song. In Lesson 4 students will describe and understand improvisation's role in a musical tune and focus on developing strategies to improve their own improvisation techniques.

Outcomes:

- Define improvisation and understand its role in a musical tune
- Describe the key aspects of a song to study before improvising: key, melody, chord changes, chord scales, form
- Describe how to work with play-alongs to prepare for improvising

Materials:

- Computer with a browser such as Chrome, Safari or Firefox, to access the Berklee PULSE website
- Projector, PA system
- PULSE Practice Journal (pdf)
- Video 4: Assessment Video Key Points Scavenger Hunt (pdf)
- Practicing Improvisation, Video Transcript (pdf)

Instructional Activity Ideas:

Exposition of Material: 5-7 minutes (including the video)

1. Teacher provides a very brief introduction (3 minutes) on the importance of “play time” and “improvisation” at the end of every practice session.
2. Teacher shows video.

Identifying Key Concepts and Terms: 10 minutes

3. After the video, provide the students with a handout Video 4: Assessment Video Key Points Scavenger Hunt that helps them find the key points in the video. Go over each of the questions out loud in class.
4. Show the video a second time. This time, students watch the video and take notes on their handout.

5. Teacher provides a transcript of the video and gives students 5-7 minutes to complete the handout, or discusses each question on the handout and students can write down the answers during discussion.

6. Students submit the handout/assessment.

(Note: It is ok that students had help with this; it's still an assessment. Depending on teaching style, teacher may not choose to give out the transcript or discuss answers until students have completed the form.)

Activity/Assessment: 10 minutes

7. Teacher: Work with students to identify a selection of chords to play over. Some students may only need a few chords, while others can work with blues changes, and more advanced students can work with rhythm changes.

- Find and listen to several versions of a song that uses the chord changes your teacher helped you to choose.
- Prepare for chord-tone improvisation.
 - Write down the key, melody, chord changes, chord scales, and form.
 - On staff paper, write out a lead sheet for the section of the tune you want to improvise with.
 - Add chord symbols over the staff in the appropriate places.
 - Under each chord symbol, write down in whole notes the notes of each chord.

In the next video, we're going to talk about the "mental game," and how we can use recordings of ourselves to identify specific areas we can improve in our playing.

Lesson Closing

- Submit the "Video 4: Assessment Video Key Points Scavenger Hunt"
- Review the song study and lead sheet with chord tones written under chord symbols on the staff

PULSE Resources: Extended Learning

Request a PULSE Demo Account

Practice Room: This area of the PULSE site offers a variety of instrument-specific resources including exercises, interactive practice tools, and instructional videos featuring Berklee faculty. Using the Practice Journal, students define and assess practice goals with the aid of their teacher.

Study Room: This area of PULSE includes curriculum resources devoted to contemporary musicianship and theory centering around the PULSE music library. Ten units of study, broken down into three levels, that focus on different musical concepts that are supported by a variety of materials like books, games, videos, exercises, interactive tools, and assessments.

- **Form Level 1:**
In this introduction to form unit, you will learn that most songs can be broken down into parts or building blocks. These blocks of music are arranged in different combinations, creating different song forms.
- **Form Level 2:**
The more you listen to and understand music, the more you'll notice the many variations to the basic song forms. In this unit you'll learn about 16-bar blues forms, look at a few more building blocks of song form, including the solo, interlude, and outro, and become more familiar with how to follow the "road map" of music using first and second endings.
- **Melody Level 2**
Gain a deeper understanding of intervals, accidentals, and minor, pentatonic and blues scales. Explore our Circle of 5ths tool to prepare for the Melody Level 2 Accidentals & Intervals and Minor, Pentatonic, and Blues Scales Quizzes.
- **Harmony Level 2**
In Harmony Level 1, you learned about keys, triads, and basic chord progressions. In Level 2, you'll continue adding to your understanding of harmony with a look at seventh chords and inversions.
- **Improvisation Level 2**
In this unit, you'll learn about motivic development, chord tones, chord scales, and modes, harmonic rhythm, dynamics and articulation, and solo structure. Each of these musical elements serves as a tool that you can use to create musical ideas and strengthen your voice through improvisation.

Jam Room: Choose repertoire from PULSE's ever-expanding collection of contemporary music in our Jam Room. Gain a deeper understanding of the songs you want to practice through our part analysis and "slow-downer" tools. Experience a live ensemble experience through the use of our Notation Mixer, a multi track mixer that synchronizes track from the PULSE Song Library to music notation.

- Play-along to the "Rhythm Changes" track that Leo Blanco used in his practice routine!