

IMPROVISING: A FIVE STEP PROGRAM

by Bill Benzon

Improvising is when you make up your own tunes on the fly. It's rather like holding a conversation, but with music. When you talk you have a pile of words and grammatical tricks at the tip of your tongue. In music those are known as licks, riffs and phrases. Developing your repertoire of licks is not difficult, but it takes time.

There are various strategies and tricks you can use to do this. Since my main instrument, the trumpet, is a melody instrument, I'm going to talk about improvising melodies. But these five steps can be applied to any kind of improvising. Here they are:

1. Play tunes by ear.
2. Embellish those tunes.
3. Go crazy.
4. Invent systems.
5. See it and play it.

I'm going to go through them in order because that's how writing works, one idea after another. But you can take these steps in whatever order makes sense to you.

If you are not already comfortable **playing by ear**, then you will have to work on that a bit. You should practice playing simple melodies: anything is suitable as long as you know it well enough to hum it or whistle it. "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "Mary Had Little Lamb," "Yankee Doodle," "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean"—whatever you know that tickles your fancy. Just play the melody on your instrument. You may stumble around a bit as you try to figure tunes out, but that's OK.

Keep in mind that any melody is going to "lay" more naturally in one key than another. At this stage you should find an easy key for each melody and figure it out in that key. Once you've got the tune down cold in one key, then you can figure out how to play it in other keys, if you need to. Keep working at this until you're able to pick up melodies almost at will.

You can also do this with little tunes you make up yourself. If you can hear it in your mind's ear, hum it, whistle it, or sing it, then you can play it on your instrument. If it's only three or four notes long, that's fine. Hum it (or whistle it, whatever) and then play it on your instrument. Play it again. Maybe you can experiment and play the first note three times and the third note twice.

The goal is reach the stage where your fingers (and toes and lungs as the case may be) are able to play melodies without you having to think about what they're doing. When you talk, you don't have to think about what your tongue is doing, how your jaws are moving, how your lips are shaped, and so forth. It just happens. But it didn't *just happen* when you were an infant. Then you spent hours upon hours babbling away, using all your powers of concentration and motor invention to produce the sounds you heard around you. Now you have to do the same kind of thing with your instrument. You have to build up "natural" correspondences between what you can hear and what you can do.

As you become more comfortable picking out tunes by ear you can begin to **embellish** them. Throw in an extra note here and there. Does it sound good? If so, make a mental note and try it again. If it doesn't sound so good, try a different note, maybe a shorter one, maybe a higher or lower one. Play around a bit until you find something that works. Toss in trills and runs and arpeggios too. For that matter, you can do this with written music as well.

So, we have two steps out five: play simple tunes, and embellish them. You need to work on the third step too: **go crazy**. Just play anything that comes to mind, even try to play wacky and weird. The idea is to keep playing. Don't stop for any reason other than to take a breath or rest your chops. Don't worry too much about how correct it sounds. Just keep playing. As you go along things will begin to sort themselves out and it will start sounding like music.

Going crazy is about attitude and invention. When you're performing with others you can't all of a sudden stop everything while you figure out what you want to do. You have to keep playing. If you don't know what you're going to play next, you still have to keep the music flowing. If your fingers start off in some direction other than the one you wanted, you still have to keep the music flowing. So, going crazy is really about *the groove and the flow*, attitude and invention in service to the *groove/flow*.

Actually, it's not so much about going crazy as it is about not getting hung-up on correctness. Just play. Sometimes you can get wild and frenetic. When you *do*, can you express hate or anger? What about joy? My friend Bill had a Schnauzer who used to jump two feet in the air when Bill returned to the apartment. That's jumping for joy. How do you get that joy into your musicking? What about sadness, or tenderness? There wild and frenetic won't do the trick. You'll have to slow down, be more relaxed. Just think the feeling, don't worry about specific notes. There are no rules now, just the feeling in the sound.

Somewhere in here you should be **inventing systems**, little ones

and then bigger ones. For example, pick two pitches and improvise something using them and only them. This will force you to be rhythmically inventive while freeing you from having to worry about whether or not you've got the right note. There's only two, so keeping track of which one to play isn't hard.

Rhythmic invention is always useful, and when you get lost and don't know what pitches to use you can always hang on to one or two pitches that sound good and invent rhythms with them. Practice the clave part from your favorite salsa. You can easily translate any two-bell rhythm to two-pitch riffs on your horn (or voice). Now settle into a New Orleans two-beat feel, or a funky James Brown groove. Get some friends together and one of you play tumbao, another conga, another quinto, and someone else do the clave, all on your horns. And no more than one or two pitches for each person.

Playing with three pitches is as easy as playing with two. Add another and you've got four. Play a section with only two pitches, now do another section using four, then drop back to three. Or you can pick a particular rhythm and stick to it, but use whatever pitches you want. maybe pick a particular pentatonic scale, or go chromatic. Play around.

The general idea is to put stringent limitations on what you are doing so that you can concentrate on one aspect of your playing. Limit pitch choice so you can play around with rhythm. Limit rhythms so you can play with pitch. Limit melodic shape so you can concentrate on rhythm or pitch.

But how do you think about melodic shape, pure and simple? The best way to approach that is through the fifth step: **see it and play it**. Draw a line on a page and then play it. Here's an example:



Notice that that's just a line; its *not* musical notes – though our system of notes on the staff started from a system of squiggles that accompanied the words for Gregorian chants. How many different ways can you play that one line? Fast, soft, high, low, happy, sad, and so forth.

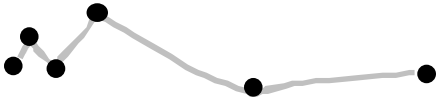
"But how do I play it at all since it's not notes," you ask. Good question. The answer: "Anyway you want to as long as it makes sense to you." That line is a melodic shape. You have to select the pitches you want to fit to that shape and figure out how you want to move from one pitch to the next. You could play it like this, where each dot is a different note:



You pick the pitches you want and determine whether to stretch the notes out or have spaces between them. Like this:



Or like this:



Maybe you want to use more notes to "cover" the line, like this:



You have to figure out how to translate a line into notes. Do it however you wish, but do pay attention to the results.

[I suppose that's some sort of meta-rule, the step of steps: Pay attention. Be mindful of what you do.]

You can do all sorts of things with a simple line. You can squeeze it together, like this:



How does playing that line differ from playing the original one? What happens if you stretch it out?



Alter the proportions?



Now lets string some of these together:



And turn part of it upside down:



And now let's reverse the whole thing, end over beginning:



As you play through these lines, remember that it all started with that one scrawl having five segments. Once you get the hang of playing with simple lines—stretching and squeezing, copying, stringing together, upside down and backwards—you'll see that you can improvise long stretches of melody from or with simple melodic material.

Of course you don't actually have to draw lines. You can imagine them in your head. And, you don't have to work with lines only. You could work with photographs or paintings, whatever. I still remember watching Steve Allen and his trio improvise a lively little tune by looking at a photograph of some birds on telephone wires—this was on TV. So, look out the window and play the birds you see on the telephone wires; play whatever you see there.

It's your tune and your life. You should do the inventing. With a little help from your friends.

