

flower

for film

an improvisation primer

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Andrea La Rose

I am writing this as a way to explore improvisation in any musical setting. The first thing many people – musicians and non-musicians alike – associate with musical improvisation is jazz. Despite my love for jazz – or perhaps because of my love for jazz – I feel it's time to reclaim improvising for all musics, and especially for those of us who, for better or for worse, are "classically trained." Improvising needs to be a normal part of everyone's music making, no matter what styles one prefers. Many people have figured out by themselves how to make up for omissions in their musical upbringing, but many haven't for various personal reasons. This is an invitation to figure it out with me.

Part of my aim is to create a work that doesn't require a traditional, Western music education. While I am very happy to have received such an education, I know that not everybody takes the same paths to the same place (thankfully). Because of this, I chose not to use any notation. Yet, in order to achieve my goals, I found that I had to use some technical language; I will do my best to define terms in a simple and direct way. Being a product of a traditional, Western music education that did not involve improvising, I want to make this a work that makes people with this background comfortable, while also asking them to stretch, musically and creatively. No matter where you are coming from, whether you are seasoned or green, use what you know to discover new things.

"rules"

- Try to stick with one improvisation as long as possible. If that's only ten seconds, that's okay; next time go for eleven.
- If you get bored, you can a) keep playing anyway and try to find some way to make it interesting, b) move on to something else, or c) stop playing altogether and find something else to do.
- If you "accidentally" move outside the scope of the directions, that's fine. You may follow that impulse or try to get back into the fold.
- Do not fear repetition. Do not fear perpetual novelty.
- All improvisations may be done with friends or strangers. You may play the same improvisation or different ones simultaneously.
- You may also try to string several improvisations together.
- Listen, listen, listen.

- **Dynamics** refers to volume and changes in volume.
- **Timbre** refers to sound quality. If you are playing a non-pitched instrument, you may substitute "timbre" wherever you see "pitch." (You may also do this if you are playing a pitched instrument) You may also just set yourself up with an array of different instruments.
- **Duration** refers to how long a sound is. If you are instructed to choose a duration, make up some way of keeping track of how long the sound lasts.
- **Envelope** is the combination of the timbre and dynamics at the beginning (attack) of a sound, the duration of the sound, and how the sound ends. If you play piano, there isn't much you can do to change the envelope, but many other instruments (and voice, of course) can have a lot of fun experimenting in this area.

[Since originally writing this, I have done various 'scholarly' work on the subject, and came across an important essay – "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives" – by George Lewis, in which he discusses jazz and improvisation as "Afrological" and "Eurological" phenomena. He writes about how many in the classical world came up with alternative terms for 'improvisation,' perhaps as a way to disassociate themselves from what was going on in African-American music – a conscious or subconscious form of racist differentiation. Do I fear being lumped in that category with my previous paragraph? Hell, yes. It's not that I don't want to learn bebop; it's that I feel my classical training has given me a language and skills with which I could learn to improvise and move more easily to, say, bebop, than by trying to start from scratch with bebop. The issue is that improvisation pedagogy doesn't exist in classical and jazz pedagogy doesn't jive 100% with classical theory. This is an attempt to bridge different musical backgrounds.]

These improvisations were written without any particular style in mind (although they owe much to particular stylistic influences). Don't worry if your improvisations don't sound like "anything." Let them sound – you can categorize later. Having said that, I do think it is a fun challenge and musically healthy to try and make your improvisations sound like Mozart, punk, bebop, zydeco, or whatever you like. Turn on the radio or put on your favorite recording, open the book and try to follow both sets of "rules" at the same time. Either way, you're bound to discover something about the way you like to play your instrument.

Pitch refers to one specific frequency, i.e. one note. Pitch-class refers to any set of pitches with the same name, i.e. if you choose "C," you may use any C available on your instrument. (I apologize for the sciencey nature of the term "pitch-class." It is a very technical musical term. While I'd like to avoid being so gosh-darned technical, I do like the exactitude of the term and can't think of a better way to put that concept.)

"Parameters" are what you can change about a pitch or a sound:

- **Bending** a note is acceptable (in my world, anyway), even though you technically have a new pitch.

The directions sometimes indicate something specific about parameters, but not very often. Parameters are like spices: experiment with them to see what you like.

An interval is the "distance" between two notes. One can get very technical about intervals, but if you are not the technical type (yet or ever), think about the "shape" a melody creates and try to recreate that shape starting on any pitch.

Indefinite pitch instruments (read: percussion) should feel free to adapt any of this work as they see fit.

Other things to consider:

Rhythm is a set of durations (often combining sound and silence). Beat is a steady pulse of any speed, although one can gradually change speed, if one wants. We usually say something is "rhythmic," when the durations give us a sense of beat. I think something can be rhythmic but not have a sense of an underlying steady pulse. But you can decide that for yourself.

Sometimes the directions call for "pitches," sometimes for "sounds." You can take that to mean whatever you want it to.

Judicious and frequent use of silence is also encouraged!

one last thought: I tried to put the directions in an order that I thought was most educationally sound. You are not obligated to proceed in that order.

1.
use one pitch.

2.
use two pitches.

3.
use three pitches.

4.
use four pitches.

5.
use five pitches.

6.
use one pitch-class.

7.
use two pitch-classes.

8.
use three pitch-classes.

9.
use four pitch-classes.

10.
use five pitch-classes.

11.
use two pitch-classes for as long as you
can. then keep one and pick a new one.
repeat this process for as long as you can.

12.
use three pitch-classes for as long as you
can. then keep two and pick one new one.
repeat this process for as long as you can.

13.
use three pitch-classes for as long as you
can. then keep one pitch and pick two new
ones. repeat this process for as long as
you can.

14.
use four pitch-classes for as long as you
can. then keep two and pick two new
ones. repeat this process for as long as
you can.

15.
use two pitches for as long as you can.
then pick two new pitches. repeat this
process for as long as you can.

16.
use three pitches for as long as you can.
then pick three new pitches. repeat this
process for as long as you can.

17.
use one interval.

18.
use two intervals.

19.
use three intervals.

20.
use four intervals.

21.
make up a short melody using three to five pitches. improvise on the shape of the melody, using as many pitches as you like.

22.
pick one duration. use as many sounds (or rests) as you like, but only that one duration.

23.
pick two durations. you may use as many sounds (or rests) as you like, but with only those two durations.

24.
ostinato i: make up a short pattern using one or more durations. repeat this pattern using as many sounds as you like.

25.
mundane tasks: using as many sounds as you like, musically describe some sort of daily activity, such as tying your shoes, washing the dishes, brushing your teeth, or whatever else you can think of.

26.
substitution i: pick a melody you know by heart. play it through (once, twice, a few times...). then play it again substituting your improvisation during the even measures (or every other phrase, if you don't know where the measures are). repeat this process as much as you like. then play it again substituting your improvisation during the odd measures (or the phrases you played "normally" the last time). repeat as much as you like.

27.
rearrangement i: pick a melody that you know by heart. play it through as many times as you want. then play it through again but rearrange the order of the pitches of the first measure (or phrase, if you don't know where the measure are) using whatever rhythm you like (but within the same amount of time that the original measure or phrase had). then play it again rearranging the first and second measures (you may rearrange the first measure). then rearrange the first three measures (or phrases). repeat this process until the whole song has been rearranged. then play it again with a new arrangement.

28.
rearrangement ii: pick a song you know by heart. play it through as many times as you like. then break up the song into little bits, and play the bits in whatever order you like, even repeating any bit as often as you like. if you are feeling particularly sassy, you may also transpose (same melody, starting on a different note) any bit.

29.

substitution ii: pick a song you know by heart. play it as many times as you like. play it again, but substitute the first pitch with any new pitch. then play it again with the new first pitch and substituting the second pitch with any new pitch. keep doing this until you have a totally new melody. then gradually substitute the new melody with a different new melody. repeat this process for as long as you like. then gradually substitute the original melody for the new melody.

31.

ostinato ii: pick two sounds and a simple rhythmic pattern. use this as an ostinato around which you improvise. the ostinato should always be clearly heard.

33.

dialog i: turn on the tv. turn off the sound. improvise a new soundtrack.

35.

dialog iii: turn on the radio. tune in to a music station. improvise using anything you don't already hear.

37.

mantra i: think up a short sentence in any language. using two pitches, reproduce as much of what the sentences sounds like as you can. repeat this for as long as you can, trying to find as many different ways to "say" the sentence as possible.

30.

pick four pitches. put them in any order you like, but they will remain in that order. start off by playing them with the same duration, repeatedly. then pick one of the four and play it a little longer or shorter and repeat this new pattern. next, pick one of the remaining three and change its duration, but not necessarily in the same way as the first; repeat. pick one of the remaining two and change its duration; repeat. change the duration of the remaining pitch; repeat this pattern. go back to the first pitch whose duration you changed and change it again. continue to systematically change the duration of each pitch, always repeating the resulting new pattern as many times as you like. gradually work your way back to having all four pitches played with the same duration. vary other parameters as you see fit.

32.

simon: pick four or more pitches. make up a sequence using the chosen pitches and any duration in the following way: 1. 12. 123. 1234. 12345. 123456...etc. If the sequence gets too long to remember, do whatever you like, no big deal.

34.

dialog ii: turn on the radio to an all-talk station. always listen carefully. while improvising, make sure you still know what is being said.

36.

reading i: using a book, magazine, or newspaper, "read" the text aloud, employing only three pitches.

38.

make a gesture with your arms, legs, or whole body; then translate the motion into sound. repeat.

39.

mantra ii: think up a short sentence in any language. using as many pitches as you wish, reproduce as much of what the sentence sounds like as you can. repeat this for as long as possible, trying to find as many different ways to "say" the sentence as you can.

41.

vieltimmiger atem: create a drone with either your instrument or your voice. play over the drone with whatever isn't already droning. with each breath, you may choose a new drone pitch or stay where you are.

43.

slow motion frenzy:

wail and whoop.

holler and howl.

ululate.

all very slowly and loudly.

40.

reading ii: using a book, magazine, or newspaper, "read" the text aloud, employing as many pitches as you like.

42.

reading iii: pick any text of any length. try to convey the meaning of the text using any sounds you like. unlike the other "reading" assignments in which you are trying to reproduce the sound of the language, here you are trying to paraphrase the ideas or context of the text in non-verbal sound.