

Improvisation and Composition in Every Classroom

Matt Turner, WMEA State Chair, Composition & Improvisation



As I journey around Wisconsin and have the good fortune of working with students and music educators, I am excited to report a new trend: numerous teachers are introducing composition and improvisation to their students more than ever before. In particular, I am observing many orchestra, general music and choir teachers embracing both of these disciplines in public schools and at the college level.

Here are some examples of recent

improvisation and composition projects in Wisconsin public schools:

- High school orchestra students are placed in small chamber groups. Students collaborate within their groups to compose a short blues or Americana-style piece. Students improvise solos during their pieces during the performance.
- Middle school choir students write a story and compose a soundtrack to accompany the narration.
- A general music teacher asks students to record environmental sounds as well as record sounds of found objects or atypical instruments. These sounds are used to

Go to the online version of *WSM* for an excellent example of a “comprovised” drone piece featuring the Lawrence University Chamber Orchestra.

create compositions similar to musique concrète.

- A high school band teacher introduces improvisation using Indian ragas. Students also compose pieces influenced by the music of John Cage and Terry Riley.
- A high school orchestra teacher asks her students to select a pop or rock song, learn it by ear and adapt or “re-compose” the song for a chamber group. The students then perform the pieces on a concert. The pieces include songs by Lady Gaga, P. Diddy, Eric Clapton and others.
- High school theater and music students combine forces to write a script and compose the music for a radio drama. The show is performed in front of an audience.

This is just the tip of the iceberg.

As chair of composition and improvisation on the WMEA Council, I am eager to meet music educators who are incorporating composition and improvisation into their curricula. I am particularly interested in assisting teachers who are enthusiastic about getting started but who feel challenged due to lack of experience. In that regard, I would like to invite you to participate in an exciting improvisation workshop to be held at the Wisconsin Center for Music Education July 21 and 22. Fred Sturm, director of jazz and improvisational music at Lawrence University, and I will be offering a two-day improvisation workshop, *Improvisation in Every*

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composition & improvisation

Classroom, for band, orchestra, choir and general music teachers. Don't improvise, you say? This workshop is perfect for you! We will be improvising in many styles including classical, Arabic taqasim, blues, "free" improvisation (non-style specific) and others. Don't feel comfortable doing this with your students or wish to enhance what you are already teaching? This workshop is perfect for you! Fred and I will provide user-friendly and accessible techniques to get you started. And, we'll also demonstrate how one can take these improvisation techniques and use them to create compositions with your students.

To get you started, here is an exercise you can use with your students in any ensemble:

Drone Piece

- One or more students quietly play or sing a drone (one sustained pitch).
- One at a time, students briefly perform an improvisation. They

might perform a melody, create new sounds with their voices, or tap rhythms on their instruments.

- You play a simple melody or riff using two or three pitches and your students collectively imitate verbatim. Eventually, you "call" with an idea and individual students respond with their own ideas. The drone continues.
- Replace the drone with a simple ostinato figure and continue with call and response. Add a few more pitches to the mix and create a simple melody that everyone can learn by ear.
- Create a composition. The first section might include the drone, the second section offers the melody over the ostinato, the third section continues the ostinato with improvised solos or collective improvisation, the fourth section returns to the melody and the piece ends with

the drone. This example would represent arch form (ABCBA), but you could organize the piece differently and use rondo form, ternary form, etc. Or, come up with your own idea. I have used this exercise with elementary, middle school, high school and college-aged ensembles and have found it to be effective, accessible and fun.

An excellent example of a "comprovised" drone piece featuring the Lawrence University Chamber Orchestra can be found in the online version of *WSM*. The piece begins at the 13-minute mark. Notice that there are no music stands!

I look forward to hearing from you and I hope to see you in July!

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