10 The Vocally Proficient Choir: Part Two
Improvisation and Choral Musicianship
Christopher D. Azzara

We are all born improvisers.

As a choral director, improvisation is probably not the first word that comes to your mind when planning your next rehearsal. In fact, improvisation is an anomaly in most music classrooms. Meanwhile, many music teachers and students wish they could improvise, and many who can improvise credit experiences outside the music classroom. Something is amiss. But with careful planning and preparation, you can introduce your students to the irreplaceable benefits of improvisation, a misunderstood but vital aspect of music education. In this chapter, I will define the word improvisation, describe its benefits in a choral setting, and give clear, specific procedures for learning to improvise.

We are all born improvisers. As young children learn and grow, they interact with their surroundings in spontaneous and meaningful ways. They live in the moment and in a heightened state of awareness—which are both characteristics of improvisation. As choral educators, you can think of these natural states of mind as models for your classroom and ensure that learning involves interaction and creativity. If you are fortunate, caregivers and teachers have done this before you.

As adults, we tend to forget what we knew in early childhood and become fearful of creativity and improvisation. A large part of that fear stems from anxiety about making mistakes and concern about what others might think. Yet

taking chances is an important part of learning to improvise. Remember skinning your knee during play when you were young? Skinning your knee is part of play, and, metaphorically, "skinning your knee" is a prerequisite for learning to improvise. The choral rehearsal can provide an excellent setting for letting go of fear and applying the principles for learning to improvise (see Figure 1). Indeed, developing improvisation skills will enhance all aspects of musicianship, with and without notation.

Model for Learning to Improvise: Principles (Figure 1) and Application (Figure 2)

Fig. 1. Principles for learning to improvise
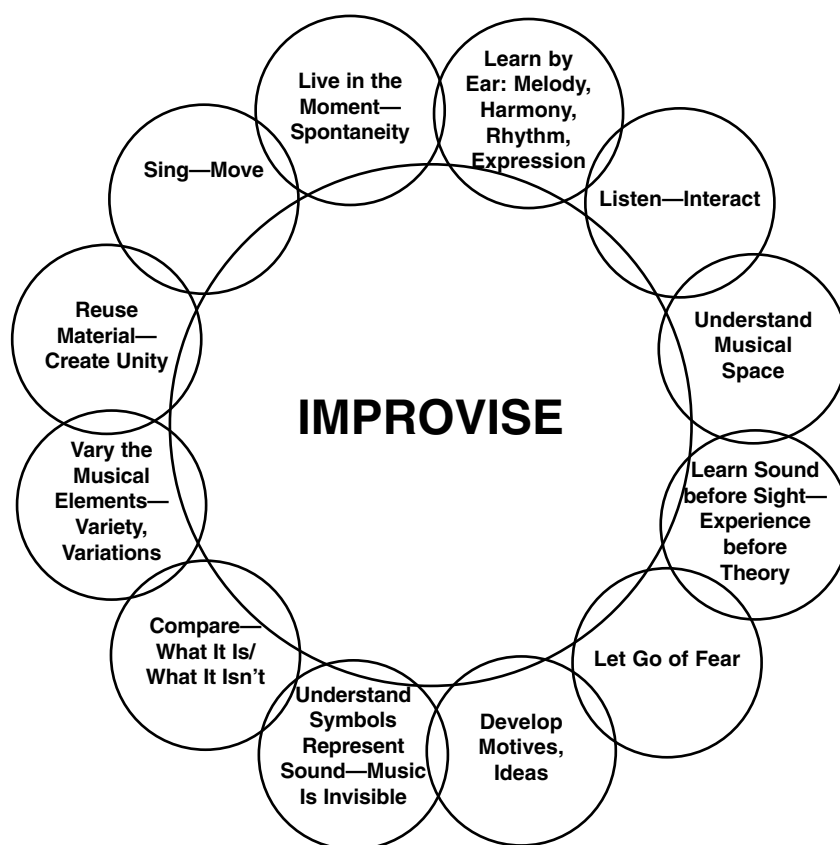
Much can be understood about improvisation in music by comparing it to conversation in language. Consider how we comprehend language. We do not attend to individual letters of the alphabet when we interact in conversation. We group language into meaningful chunks. (The same is true for reading language.) A phoneme, the smallest phonetic unit, has no meaning out of context. For example, what does a "g" sound like? We know by its contexts, and there are many! *Goat, ghost, giraffe, cough, through, though, bough, mirage*, and *gnome* all contain a "g."

Nor are words alone sufficient for comprehension. We have to put them into the context of noun and verb phrases to provide meaning. For example, the word *mean* in "This is what I mean" is different from *mean* in "The mean was 50" and "That person was mean." As words are spoken, the listener establishes a context for meaning (through these noun and verb phrases) while anticipating and predicting what will be said next (Pinker 1995). The hearer listens actively for meaning. It is no coincidence that one of the first words children say is "again" and one of the first questions they ask is "What does that mean?"

The same kind of interactions and context clues important for listening to and spontaneously producing language are important for listening to and spontaneously producing (improvising) music. To comprehend music, we group sounds into meaningful chunks; notes and intervals are not enough. For example, E may function as the resting tone in E major or as the leading tone in F major. Groups of notes (patterns) are like words in language. F, A, and C could be a tonic triad or part of a Dm7, a $B^{\flat maj9}$, or an $E^{\flat 13(\#11)}$. To understand the note and chord in context, we must relate the note and chord to what came before and what follows, just as we relate letters and words to what comes before and what follows. Notes participate with other notes to provide musical meaning. Thus, to improvise, read, write, and comprehend music we must put tonal patterns and rhythm patterns—musical words—into the context of harmonic progressions, tonality, meter, and style. Common musical syntax provides context for creating familiar and unfamiliar music.

Improvisation is the manifestation of musical thought. It is the meaningful expression of musical ideas, analogous to conversation in language. Spontaneity, personalization, interaction, and being in the moment are central to improvisation.

By developing your musicianship through improvisation, you and your choirs will have more meaningful experiences when you rehearse and perform music.

Improvising in the Choral Setting

By studying repertoire in a variety of styles, I will examine several key elements of improvisation: 1) listening and interacting spontaneously as an improviser; 2) singing, moving, and learning by ear; 3) learning harmony and rhythm by ear; 4) learning musical vocabulary by ear; and, certainly, 5) taking chances (being willing to skin your knee). Specifically, I will present a model for learning how to improvise (for further study, consult Azzara and Grunow 2006). Learners using this model will progress through the following sequence: 1) learning repertoire, 2) learning patterns and progressions, 3) improvising melodic phrases through spontaneous interaction, 4) learning to improvise—"Seven Skills," 5) learning solos by ear, and 6) reading and composing music in the context of improvisation. (See Figure 2.)

Fig. 2. Application
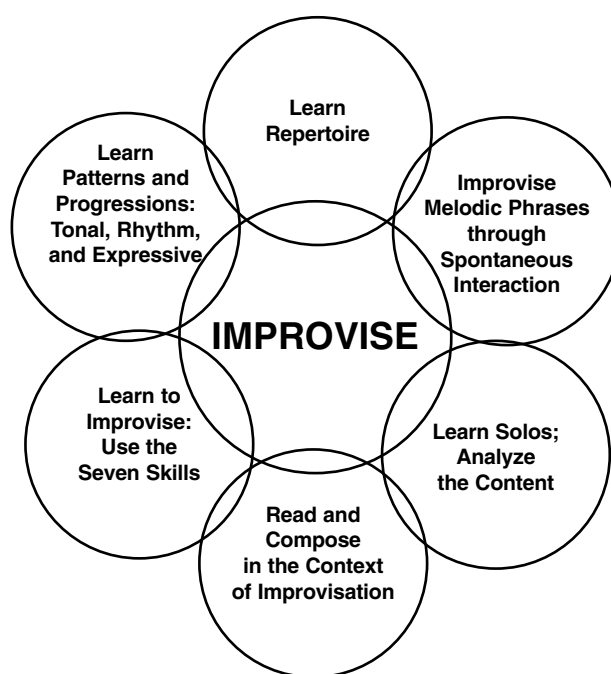
Repertoire

As one of the most fundamental aspects of this process, you and your students should learn many tunes by ear in a variety of styles, tonalities, and meters. Vary the music you are learning. For example, sing major songs in minor and perform duple songs in triple (when musically appropriate). Making comparisons is important to learning. Knowing what something is *not* will help your students improve their understanding of what it is: hot/cold, up/down, over/under, heavy/light, in/out, major/minor, tonic/dominant, duple/triple.

Your repertoire could come from any of a variety of musical sources, e.g., folk tunes, spontaneous songs, jazz standards, and classical themes. As your students begin to understand repertoire, they will aurally anticipate the harmony, meter, and expressive elements of the music. Like conversation in language, interaction is crucial to improvising music. To initiate this interaction, teach your students to sing the melody and then the bass line for several pieces by ear. In the beginning, sing a bass line created from the roots of the chords in the harmonic progression. Half of the chorus can sing this bass line while the other half sings the melody. Because the students will learn the melody and bass line from you or from a peer, the source of inspiration for the music is a person. The harmonic, rhythmic, and expressive contexts of the music are passed aurally from person to person.

Getting Started

"Simple Gifts" (Figure 3) is an excellent song for your choir to sing as they start to build their repertoire. Teach "Simple Gifts" to your choir by ear.

Fig. 3. "Simple Gifts"

Learning Patterns and Progressions in the Context and Style of the Repertoire

After your choir learns the melody and bass line for "Simple Gifts," teach by ear the rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, and expressive elements of the song. Help them to understand how this material is reused in creative and meaningful ways. The following musical elements, for example, are sources for improvising:

1. Rhythm patterns and phrases

and

2. Tonal patterns

3. Harmonic progressions (e.g., I–V^7–I)

4. Melodic phrases

5. Expressive elements such as dynamics, articulation, and tone quality

Improvising Patterns, Phrases, and Progressions

You and your students should improvise a variety of rhythm patterns, tonal patterns, and expressive phrases based on this vocabulary. For example, using similar rhythm patterns in the style of "Simple Gifts," your students can echo and improvise rhythm patterns and phrases.
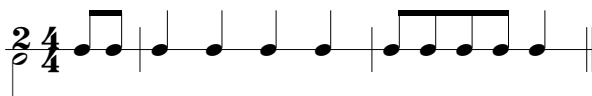
First, the students echo alone and as a group after you chant rhythm patterns and phrases. For example:

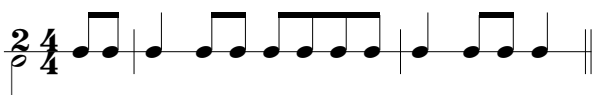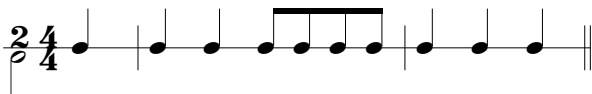Chant using the syllable "bah":

Students echo.

You chant:

Students echo.

When the students are familiar with this rhythm vocabulary, they should improvise rhythm patterns and phrases alone and as a group. For example:

Chant using the syllable "bah":

Student improvises:

Chant using the syllable "bah":

Student improvises:

Next, improvise by singing individual tonic and dominant patterns and series of tonic and dominant patterns. In major, a tonic pattern is any combination of *do–mi–so,* and a dominant pattern is any combination of *so–fa–re–ti.* Before improvising, the students should echo alone and as a group after you sing patterns.
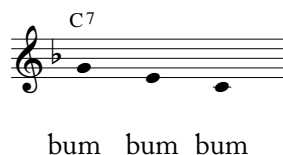
For example, establish tonality in F major and sing tonal patterns, first using the syllable "bum."
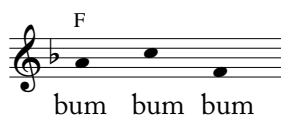
You sing:

bum   bum bum

Students echo.
You sing:

bum   bum   bum

Students echo.

You sing:

F

bum   bum   bum
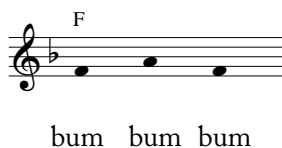
Students echo.

After the students can sing all of the tonal patterns you teach for "Simple Gifts" on "bum," sing them with tonal syllables (e.g., *do–mi–do, re-ti-so, mi-so-do*).

Next, sing progressions of patterns, first using the syllable "bum" and then using tonal syllables:

F   C7   C7   F

Students echo.

Teach students to identify and sing the functions of these patterns.

Functions

F   C7   C7   F

"DO"–"Tonic"   "SO"–"Dominant"   "SO"–"Dominant"   "DO"–"Tonic"

After the students are familiar with this tonal vocabulary, they should improvise tonal patterns and phrases alone and as a group. For example:

You sing a tonic pattern:

F

DO   MI   DO

A student improvises a tonic pattern:

DO   MI   SO

You sing a dominant pattern:

RE   TI   SO

A student improvises a dominant pattern:

RE   TI   RE
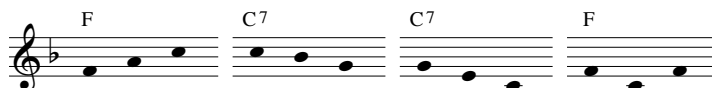
You sing:

MI   SO   DO

A student improvises:

DO   SO   DO

Next, sing tonic–dominant harmonic progressions in major. For example:

Students should improvise patterns to tonic–dominant harmonic progressions in major. For example:


Tonal patterns and rhythm patterns in music are similar to words in language. When students become familiar with these patterns, they will increase the musical vocabulary they need for improvisation, and they will improve their comprehension. Improvising a series of rhythm patterns or a progression of tonic and dominant patterns in music is similar to speaking a sentence or a phrase in language. Certain progressions and phrases will become as familiar as everyday language. When your students hear something new or different, it will have context.

Harmony

A tree diagram (Figure 4) illustrates the harmonic structure of "Simple Gifts." Consider the melodic material as the leaves and twigs of the tree. To survive, leaves and twigs need the support of the branches, trunk, roots, and earth.

Fig. 4. Harmony
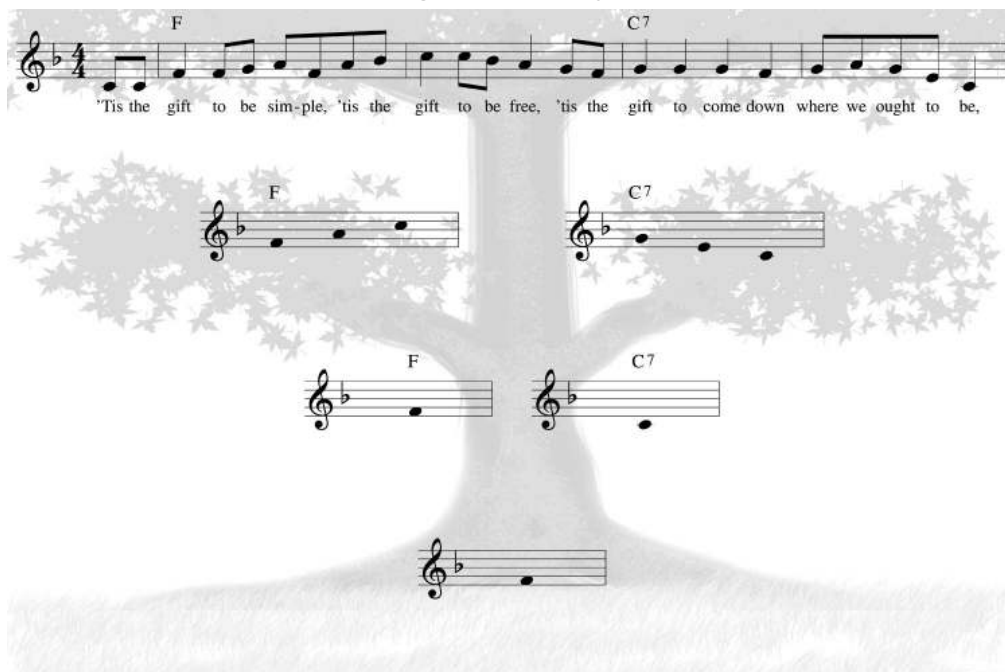
Improvising melodic material requires an understanding of the melody, but, more fundamentally, it requires an understanding of the progression of tonal patterns (branches), roots of these patterns/chords (roots and trunk), and resting tone (earth).

Internalizing and feeling harmony in this manner provides a context for improvising. This understanding can be developed in the choral rehearsal in many ways. For example, one half of your chorus can sing the melody "Simple Gifts" while the other half sings the resting tone. Listen for and feel the tension and release of the harmony. Sing the song again with half of your choir singing the melody and the other half singing the roots of the harmonic progression.

Sing the song another time while improvising tonal patterns on a syllable such as "doo." There are several ways to arrange the choir, for example, ladies/gentlemen; student numbers 1 and 2; and various combinations of SATB. The resting tone, roots, and tonal patterns provide context—arrival points for improvising melodies. As your students improvise, they can arrive on these pitches or sing through them. Non-chord tones will provide color and expression when understood in this harmonic context. Without this understanding, these tones may sound uncomfortable or unresolved. It's the difference between improvising a solo that sounds advanced and one that has so-called mistakes.

An important aspect of understanding harmony involves voice leading, that is, where notes "like to go" in the genre performed. Eventually, improvisers understand that relationships among notes are unlimited. But, initially, students should learn the most fundamental voice leading for harmonic context by ear. In the style of "Simple Gifts," with a tonic–dominant–tonic harmonic progression (I–V7–I) in major, *do* likes to go to *ti* or *so* and then back to *do*; *mi* likes to go to *fa* and then back to *mi*; *so* in a tonic chord could stay on *so* for the dominant and then stay on *so* again or go back to *do* for tonic. Have the chorus sing these lines by ear simultaneously, and a feeling for the harmony will emerge.

This harmonic understanding will also help direct your students to an understanding of musical syntax. In language you would not say "To I sing love." In this case, "I" likes to go to "love," which likes to go to "to," which goes to "sing." "I love to sing." Many common harmonic progressions become as familiar as common sentences and common syntax in language. Students should internalize

progressions such as I–IV–V–I; I–vi–ii–V⁷–I; and I–V⁷/V–V⁷–I to the point that they become second nature.

Start by teaching your students to sing the melody and bass line by ear for repertoire containing these common progressions in a variety of musical styles. If you want to learn where notes "like to go," study J. S. Bach, starting with the chorales. Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on the use of Bach chorales to develop skills.

Rhythm

Another tree could be used to illustrate the rhythmic structure of a tune (Figure 5). As shown here, the large-beat (Du)/small-beat (Du–De) relationship is movable. Feeling different levels of the beat will provide inspiration for improvisation. For example, your choir can sing "Simple Gifts" and move, placing the large beat in their feet and the small beat in their hands. At first, feel the quarter note as the large beat. Then, make half notes the large beats and quarter notes the small beats. Sing the song again, making the whole note the large beat and the half note the small beat, and feel the space between the beats. In each of these levels, the large beats and small beats—variously providing points of arrival—will inspire unique ideas for improvisation. A comfortable place to begin feeling the large-beat/small-beat relationship is to make the half note Du, quarter notes Du–De, and the eighth notes Du–Ta–De–Ta (pronounced "doo," "tuh," "day," "tuh").
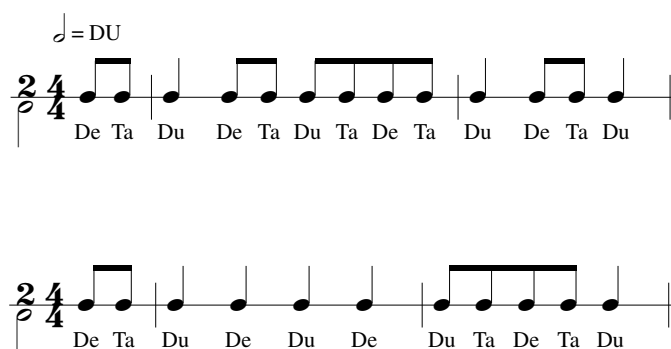
Fig. 5. Rhythm

These syllables provide a name for the essential rhythms that define the meter and feel for "Simple Gifts." You can use these syllables to describe to your students the guidelines for improvising.

After the students can chant rhythm patterns on the syllable "bah," chant the patterns with rhythm sllables. Then, you could say "Listen to these rhythm patterns for 'Simple Gifts.' "

"Using the rhythm syllables as a guide, improvise a rhythm pattern that incorporates similar content."

A student improvises (for example):

Context and Anticipation
Improvising Melodic Phrases

You will be pleased to hear the melodies students improvise in response to your asking them to finish a phrase. Sing the first phrase of "Simple Gifts" for your students on a syllable such as "doo." Then, instead of having students continue with the original second phrase, have them improvise a second phrase by singing a melody that continues in the context of the harmonic progression. Encourage the students to trust themselves. It will help if they sing a chord tone (such as the root or the third of the chord) at the end of the phrase as an arrival point for the improvised phrase. They should begin to feel how to anticipate a note or line and arrive there or somewhere else (Figure 6).

Example   **Fig. 6. Improvising "Simple Gifts"**

Improvise

Improvising: Seven Skills

The purpose of the seven skills is to bring out your students' ability to improvise. Be sure to review the melody and bass line for the tune you are improvising as you help your students with these skills.

Skill 1. On a syllable such as "doo," students improvise rhythm patterns while singing the bass line of *Simple Gifts* (Figure 7).

Fig. 7. Improvise rhythms on chord roots
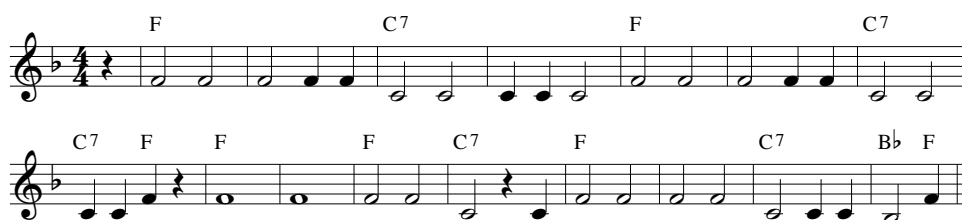
Skill 2. Students learn the four parts shown in Figure 8 to help them understand the essential voice leading of the tune by ear. Every student should have a chance to sing all the parts. For example, start with the sopranos on Part I, altos on Part II, tenors on Part III, and basses on Part IV (the bass line). Then, the tenors and basses can sing Parts I and II, and the sopranos and altos can sing Parts III and IV. In addition to increasing musicianship, your choir will obtain various textures and colors by singing different arrangements of these parts.

The harmony for this setting of "Simple Gifts" is primarily tonic and dominant with an interesting IV–I cadence at the end. The following four parts can be used as a point of departure for discovering the places that pitches "like to go" (Figure 8).

Fig. 8. Voice leading

Skill 3. Students learn the harmonic rhythm for "Simple Gifts." Using the pitches in Skill 2, sustain the notes and change pitches when the harmony changes. (See Figure 3 for the harmonic progression.)

Skill 4. Students improvise rhythm patterns to the harmonic progression for "Simple Gifts" using the pitches learned in Skill 2 (Figure 8). Part of the chorus can sing the melody while the rest of the chorus improvises an accompaniment on a syllable such as "doo." Encourage students to interact rhythmically with the melody and other parts, leave musical space, and develop rhythmic motives (Figure 9).

Fig. 9. "Simple Gifts"—melody with four parts

IMPROVISE RHYTHM ON "MI" AND "FA"

IMPROVISE RHYTHM ON "SO" AND "LA"

Skill 5. After becoming comfortable improvising tonal patterns, students improvise to the harmonic progression of "Simple Gifts" on each large beat (Du). As the harmony progresses, students can sing patterns that outline the chord changes on a syllable such as "doo." The pitches in these patterns are arrival points in the music that your students can either land on or delay. For example:
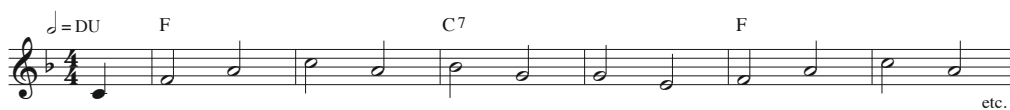
Skill 6. Next, students combine tonal patterns and rhythm patterns for "Simple Gifts" and improvise a melody such as:

Skill 7. Students decorate and embellish the melodic material from Skill 6 and improvise a melody on a syllable such as "doo." They use the chord tones in the tonal patterns and chord roots in the harmonic progression as arrival points to anticipate what they will sing. For example:
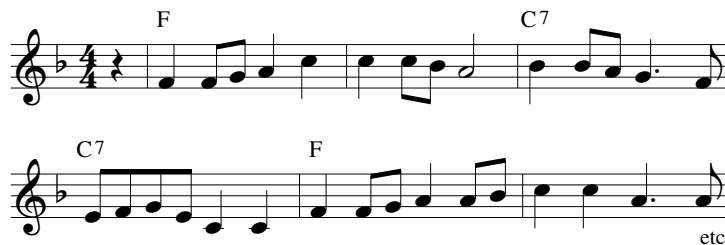
These seven skills provide a model for learning to improvise. Once you and your students have internalized these skills, let go of any over-analysis and concentrate on creating melodies.

Learning Solos

Learning to sing others' improvisations will increase music vocabulary and improve improvisations. Learn to sing improvised solos performed live and on recordings by ear. Ask your students to notate the solos they learn, and then have them analyze the content. They can incorporate any new vocabulary they have learned into their improvised solos.

Repertoire: Contrasting Style

"Down by the Riverside" provides a contrasting repertoire example, with a style different from that of "Simple Gifts." It also lends itself well to improvisation in your choral rehearsal.

Fig. 10. "Down by the Riverside"

I ain't gon - na stud - y war no more, ___ I ain't gon - na stud - y war no more, ___

stud - y war no more. I ain't gon - na stud - y war no more, I ain't gon - na

stud - y war no more, ___ stud - y ___ war no more. ___

Learning Patterns and Progressions

To provide a swing feel for "Down by the Riverside," make the half note Du, quarter notes Du–De, and the eighth notes Du–Di–De–Di (pronounced "doo," "dee," "day," "dee"). Again, these syllables provide a name for the essential rhythms that define the meter and feel for "Down by the Riverside." Using similar rhythm patterns in the style of "Down by the Riverside," you and your students can improvise rhythm patterns and phrases. For example:

Du   Du   De   Du   De   Du   De

De   Du   Di   Du Di   Di___

Di   De   Di   Du   De   De   Du Di   Di___

Also, improvise singing tonic, subdominant, and dominant patterns as well as series of patterns. Remember, in major a tonic pattern is any combination of *do–mi–so,* a subdominant pattern is any combination of *fa–la–do*, and a dominant pattern is any combination of *so–fa–re–ti*.

Patterns

Functions
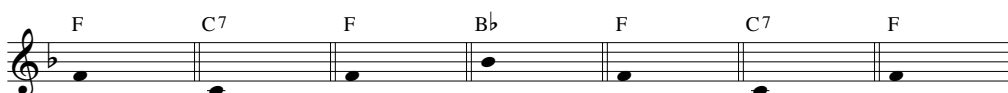
Improvise

Improvising Melodic Phrases

Sing the first phrase of "Down by the Riverside" for your students on a syllable such as "doo." Then, instead of having students continue with the original second phrase, have them improvise a second phrase by singing a melody that continues in the context of the harmonic progression. Remember, it will help your students to sing a chord tone (such as the root or the third of the chord) at the end of the phrase as an arrival point for the improvised phrase. Your students will enjoy using their natural instinct to create improvised melodies (Figure 11).

Fig. 11. Improvising "Down by the Riverside"

Example

MELODY

IMPROVISE

Improvise

MELODY

IMPROVISE

MELODY

IMPROVISE

Improvising: Seven Skills

Review the melody and bass line for "Down by the Riverside" with your students to provide them with a context for these skills.

Skill 1. On a syllable such as "doo," students improvise rhythm patterns while singing the bass line of "Down by the Riverside."

Fig. 12. Improvise rhythms on chord roots

Skill 2. Since this tune also uses I, IV, and V⁷ harmony, sing the parts in Figure 13 to remind students of the essential voice leading by ear.

Fig. 13. Voice leading

Skill 3. Using the pitches in Skill 2, teach students the harmonic rhythm for "Down by the Riverside." (See Figure 10 for the harmonic progression.)

Skill 4. Students improvise rhythm patterns to the harmonic progression for "Down by the Riverside" using the pitches learned in Skill 2. Sing these parts on a syllable such as "doo." Remind them to interact rhythmically with the melody and other parts, leave musical space, and develop rhythmic motives (Figure 14).

Fig. 14. "Down by the Riverside"—melody with four parts

BASS LINE; IMPROVISE RHYTHM

IMPROVISE RHYTHM ON "DO" AND "TI"

IMPROVISE RHYTHM ON "MI" AND "FA"

IMPROVISE RHYTHM ON "SO" AND "LA"

Skill 5. Students improvise tonal patterns to the harmonic progression of "Down by the Riverside" on each large beat (Du). As the harmony progresses, students sing patterns that outline the chord changes on a syllable such as "doo."

For example:

Skill 6. At this point, students combine tonal patterns and rhythm patterns for "Down by the Riverside" and improvise a melody such as:

Skill 7. Students can decorate and embellish the melodic material in Skill 6 and improvise a melody. The following tune (Figure 15), titled "Down by the Lakeside," started off as an example for students and evolved into a composition based on the chord changes for "Down by the Riverside." It is presented here in the spirit of tunes such as "Anthropology" by Charlie Parker, which is based on the chord changes for "I Got Rhythm" by George Gershwin.

Fig. 15. "Down by the Lakeside"

Learning Solos

Remember, learning to sing others' improvisations, and in this case a tune based on the same chord changes, will increase music vocabulary and improve improvisations. As students internalize the tonal, rhythmic, expressive, and stylistic elements of the music, they will incorporate these elements into their own improvised solos.

Reading and Writing Music

Two authors remind us of what it means to read. In her book *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, educator and psychologist Jane M. Healy describes reading as an active search for meaning. She writes, "The ability to 'bark at print' is not reading, but many people, including well-meaning parents, think it is." She continues, "The real heart of the matter [is]: How well do [children] understand what they have read? Can they reason— and talk, and write—about it?" (Healy 1990, p. 26). Novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, states that a reader's mind has the potential to "explode" and "give birth to all kinds of other ideas." Think of how severely all that wonderful activity would be impaired for one trying to read and comprehend without ever having first spoken the language.

The same holds true for reading music notation in the context of creativity and improvisation. You will want your students to read (and listen to) music and have their minds "explode" and "give birth to all kinds of other [musical] ideas." Too often, reading and writing notation are taught without regard to listening, comprehension, and improvisation.

Music is invisible. Notation, though often referred to as music, presents the symbols for music. Notation is documentation of a creative process and should be taught in that light. Reading notation should bring out musicianship. Your students can demonstrate their understanding of the music they read through improvisation and composition. Writing music allows musicians to create, develop, reflect, and revise musical ideas in time. Relationships among listening, improvising, reading, writing, and analyzing music give each the potential to influence the other in significant ways when all have been presented in the context of improvisation.

Also remember that your students can write solos they have learned by ear, and they can analyze them for vocabulary and ideas to incorporate into their own improvised solos. All the while they will have the time and stimulation needed to reflect on how they can improve. As they revise their work, they begin to compose counterpoint for the repertoire they are learning.

Assessment

The following ideas will help you improve your skills as an improvising musician and ultimately provide you with suggestions for helping your students improvise. Use these suggestions and the criteria presented in Figure 16 to help you assess your students' improvisation skills.

- Change the phrase length: make it longer (augmentation); make it shorter (diminution).
- Change the articulation.
- Change the dynamics.
- Change the register and range.
- Develop motives and reuse material.
- Listen for the way composers and improvisers reuse material in interesting ways.
- Try for unity and variety in your improvisations.
- Let go of fear—let a musical idea come to mind.
- Be inspired by the musicians improvising with you.
- Pause; leave some space for spontaneous interaction to occur.
- Play with musical ideas—repeat them, develop them.

Fig. 16. Assessing improvisation achievement

Improvisation (additive dimension, 0–5)	Expressive (additive dimension, 0–5)
Try to include all of the following criteria in your improvisations. Circle all that apply. The improviser:	Try to include all of the following criteria in your improvisations. Circle all that apply. The improviser:
1 performs a variety of related ideas and reuses material in the context of the overall form. (Thus, the performance contains elements of unity and variety.)	1 demonstrates a sense of musical interaction (e.g., melodic dialogue alone or musical conversation among performers).
1 demonstrates motivic development through tonal and rhythmic sequences.	1 demonstrates an understanding of dynamics.
1 demonstrates effective use of silence.	1 demonstrates a sense of musical style and characteristic tone quality.
1 demonstrates an understanding of tension and release through resolution of notes in the context of the harmonic progression.	1 demonstrates a sense of appropriate articulation.
1 embellishes notes and performs variations of themes.	1 demonstrates an understanding of appropriate phrasing.

Fig. 16. Assessing improvisation achievement (continued)

Rhythm (continuous dimension, 0–5)	Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5, tonic and dominant or tonic and subtonic)
Try to establish a cohesive solo rhythmically—develop rhythmic motives in the context of the overall form. As solos improve, indicate progress by circling one of the following. The improviser:	This dimension will vary depending upon the harmonic vocabulary of the tune. Try to perform all patterns in all functions correctly. As solos improve, indicate progress by circling one of the following. The improviser:
1 performs individual beats without a sense of meter.	1 performs first and/or last note correctly.
2 demonstrates a rhythmic feeling of the meter throughout.	2 performs some patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).
3 employs contrasting rhythm patterns without a sense of rhythmic motivic development.	3 performs all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).
4 begins to develop and relate rhythmic ideas in some phrases.	4 performs all patterns in one function (tonic) correctly and some patterns in one other function correctly.
5 establishes a cohesive solo rhythmically, and develops rhythmic motives in the context of the overall form.	5 performs all patterns in tonic and dominant function correctly.

Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5, tonic, subdominant, dominant or tonic, subtonic, subdominant)

This dimension will vary depending upon the harmonic vocabulary of the tune. Try to perform all patterns in all functions correctly. As solos improve, indicate progress by circling one of the following. The improviser:

1 performs first and/or last note correctly.

2 performs all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).

3 performs all patterns in one function (tonic) correctly and some patterns in one other function correctly.

4 performs all patterns in two functions correctly.

5 performs all tonic, dominant, and subdominant patterns (functions) correctly.

Harmonic Progression (continuous dimension, 0–5, tonic, pre-dominant, dominant, and other functions)

This dimension will vary depending upon the harmonic vocabulary of the tune. Try to perform all patterns in all functions correctly. As solos improve, indicate progress by circling one of the following. The improviser:

1 performs first and/or last note correctly.

2 performs all patterns in one function correctly (tonic reference).

3 performs all patterns in two functions correctly.

4 performs all patterns in three functions correctly.

5 performs all patterns in all functions correctly.

Learning Harmonic Progressions: Understanding Melodic Material in Context

An excellent way to increase students' harmonic understanding is to sing and study Bach chorales. Bach, being an exuberant improviser, composed musical lines that provide a tremendous resource for understanding where notes "like to go." Bach's music is applicable to many styles of music.

In composing cantatas, passions, and chorale preludes, Bach used chorale tunes familiar to his congregation. Here are excerpts from three settings of "Ermuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist" (melody by Johann Schop, 1641; harmony by J. S. Bach). Notice that Bach sets this melody in two keys (D major and G major), in two meters (duple and triple), and with three harmonic realizations (Figures 17–19).

Sing the chorales with your chorus using a neutral syllable such as "doo" and with the text. (The text for the chorale excerpts appears at the end of the chapter.) After your choir sings the chorales SATB, give everyone a chance to sing each of the parts.

Fig. 17. BWV 11

Fig. 18. BWV 43

Fig. 19. BWV 248

The chorale in Figure 18 is a case in point. To improve your students' understanding of the chorale, give everyone in the choir the chance to sing the soprano part and then the bass part on a neutral syllable such as "doo." Half of the choir should sing the melody while the other half sings the bass line (Figure 20). Work with the choir to develop an understanding of how the bass line moves from chord to chord in the harmonic progression. Notice in this example that many of the notes in the bass part are the roots of chords. As I have already suggested, it is important to sing these pitches with an understanding of what music has come before and what music comes next.

Fig. 20. BWV 43, harmonic context

Now have your choir sing the same chorale SATB. All these musical lines demonstrate the voice-leading concepts presented in this chapter, and all help students improve their ability with Skill 2 of the seven skills. A straightforward example of this happens in mm. 5–8. For the progression, I–IV–I–V–vi–V–I, in the bass part *do* goes to *fa* and back to *do*; *do* then goes to *so*; *so* to *la* and back to *so*; and the passage ends *so* to *do*—all common syntax for improvising music. The other three parts provide several examples of basic voice leading as well. This common melodic material (e.g., *do–ti–do*, *mi–fa–mi*, and *mi–re–do*) can provide melodic and harmonic context for repertoire in many styles.

Using the procedures discussed in this chapter (see Figure 2), students can sing their own musical lines while others are singing the bass line for chorales (Figure 21). They will need to keep the melodic line in mind and direct improvised melodies toward chord tones in the progression. These procedures also provide a context for you to teach the guidelines for voice leading in this style.

Fig. 21. Improvising on BWV 43

The final musical example in this chapter is a canon by Mozart. This canon (Figure 22) is representative of Mozart's creativity using a limited harmonic vocabulary. Sing the canon with your choir using a syllable such as "doo." Notice that Mozart delays the resting tone, *do*, until the end of the first phrase. Also, the first phrase starts on *mi*, the second phrase starts on *so*, the third phrase starts on *mi*, and, finally, the fourth phrase starts on *do*.

Fig. 22. Canon (Mozart)

After your choir has learned the canon, have half of the students sing the melody while the other half sings the roots of the chords as a bass line. By using this canon as the point of departure and by following the procedures outlined in this chapter (see Figure 2), your students can improvise their own counterpoint.

Use the pitches in Figure 23 to have your students improvise and develop skill with the arrival notes they will sing when they improvise their own canons and counterpoint.

Fig. 23. Skill 4, Canon (Mozart)

Also teach your students to improvise tonal patterns to the harmonic progression on each large beat of the canon (Skill 5). As the harmony progresses, your students can sing patterns that outline the chord changes. For example:

Fig. 24. Skill 5, Canon (Mozart)

Notice that the melody of this canon provides excellent examples of Skills 6 (mm. 1–5) and 7 (mm. 6–8).

Fig. 25. Skills 6–7, Canon (Mozart)

Summary

The importance of internalizing many melodies and bass lines cannot be overstated. Once your students have learned an abundance of melodies and bass lines, they will have acquired rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and expressive context for improvisation. It will be important for them to learn music in a variety of tonalities (major, minor, Dorian, Mixolydian), meters (duple, triple, 5/8, 7/8), and styles (folk, jazz, popular, classical).

A good way to begin learning to improvise and improve your improvisational skill is to listen to other musicians improvise. Help your students to become aware of how improvisers:

- Personalize melodies with expressive phrasing, dynamics, and tonal and rhythm variation.
- Play spontaneously and in the moment.
- Play with space (silence).
- Interact with one another.
- Develop motives.
- Understand harmony and rhythm by ear.
- Sing and play musical ideas that come to mind.

In summary, to enable your students to enjoy the musical benefits of improvisation, guide them to engage in the following activities:

1. Learn tunes and improvised solos from other musicians, live and recorded. Developing a sizable repertoire of tunes by ear will provide a basis for their developing improvised solos.
2. Listen to improvised music with the ears of an improviser. Interact musically and notice the spontaneous interaction of improvisers.
3. Learn harmony by ear.
4. Learn harmonic, rhythmic, and expressive vocabulary by ear.
5. Take risks. Try out some new ideas.
6. Surround yourself with others working on the same principles.

With the musicianship acquired through improvisation, members of your choir will have ownership of the music they are singing. The balance, blend, and intonation of the chorus will improve greatly as the singers continue to develop their musicianship. Students will be more confident and motivated. They will be eager to learn and will focus more clearly on the music they are singing.

Improvisation is essential to musical expression, as it involves interaction with music and musicians. All students have the potential to express thoughts and feelings through music. Yet, improvisation is rare in most music classrooms. For improvisation to become more pervasive, we must develop our musicianship and deepen our understanding of the learning process.

Bach Chorale Text

BWV 11

Nun lieget alles unter dir, dich selbst nur ausgenommen;
Die Engel müssen für und für dir aufzuwarten kommen.

BWV 43

Du Lebensfürst, Herr Jesu Christ, der du bist aufgenommen
Gen Himmel, da dein Vater ist und die Gemein' der Frommen.

BWV 248

Brich an, o schönes Morgenlicht, und laß den Himmel tagen!
Du Hirtenvolk, erschrecke nicht, weil dir die Engel sagen:
Daß dieses schwache Knäbelein soll unser Trost und Freude sein,
Dazu den Satan zwingen und letztlich Frieden bringen!

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