

*It Ain't Got That Swing:
Using Jazz Thinking to Teach Classical Improvisation*

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Like a bug fossilized in amber, the general music curriculum common to nearly all colleges in America represents a brief moment in time rendered permanent and inanimate for the ages. Improvisation was ubiquitous through centuries of human music-making, but it happens that our core music courses were “standardized” at an odd moment in history right when we had forgotten how to do it.

Fully written-out keyboard accompaniments almost did not exist in the Baroque; the system of figured bass rendered a complete score superfluous, and nearly all keyboard accompaniment was partly faked. And why did this skill of spontaneous musical invention disappear? At the risk of hopeless oversimplification: the rise of the genius composer and his masterpieces which required precise re-creation; diversification of writing and performing styles such that Schumann did not want his song accompaniments sounding like Schubert's; and the gradual expansion of the middle class with its hordes of amateur musicians who could not be expected to master the towering theoretical knowledge needed for improvisation. Or something like that.

But now here we sit in the shadow of the CMS Report on the Undergraduate Music Major, a battle cry of iconoclasm and forward thinking which proposes that improvisation become a central element in theory training, along with NASM's Advisory for Music Faculty and Administrators on Composition and Improvisation, a milder document but nevertheless one that recognizes that the old model shall not hold, and we really must do something about improv.

CMS and NASM, of course, are merely admitting what our students already know: improvisation is useful, interesting, and impressive. Old stylistic boundaries, in which one could be purely “classical” and specialize in, say, Mozart sonatas ones whole life, are breaking down. Nor do our students resent these breaking boundaries; they esteem Mendelssohn as well as Mumford, Stravinsky together with Sufjan. Palestrina and Pomplamoose.

Here is the problem: a younger generation of students hopes to be taught improvisation by the current generation of faculty, who went to school when no one taught improvisation. I can count at least ten times over the last few months when colleagues of mine, excellent faculty artists at colleges throughout the region, have confided to me that they would love to improvise and teach improvisation but believe they have no gift for it, and don't know where to start learning.

That choice of words says everything: no gift for it. It says that we believe improvisation is mystical, an unaccountable ability one either has or has not. Some were born under the lucky star of improvisation and some were not, it seems.

That characterization would have made Bach laugh. He knew, as did every musician of his time, that improvisation is a skill, learned by steps and improved with time and practice. In our time we see it as a mysterious gift only because we don't have any improvisation classes in our schools. If you never saw a woodworking shop, you would think rocking chairs were made by magic, too.

The point is that improvisation can be learned. You can improvise.

The purpose of this presentation is to use an accessible concept – that of jazz thinking – and apply it to improvisation in classical styles. Let's begin.