

Transforming the Curriculum:
A Pedagogy of Small Ensemble Improvisation for All Music Majors

From the CMS Task Force:

One of the most startling shortcomings in all of arts education is that too many music students graduate with ... no experience in the essential creative processes of improvisation and composition... [F]or music graduates, a lack of skill or even cursory experience in composition and improvisation is the norm rather than the exception. Ironically, although appeals for inclusion of the arts in education are often grounded in the need to cultivate creativity in all students, music study has long been predicated on the subordination of creativity to technical proficiency and interpretive performance.

Over the past decade and a half, faculty, institutions, and organizations concerned with higher music education have made important efforts to incorporate more creative experience and diverse musical styles into the curriculum.... Most agree, however, that resulting advances have not permeated the overall curriculum as widely as might be hoped, and that continuing work is essential.

Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations:

A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Major

Improvisation is coming back and we aren't ready.

Most music faculty are not improvisers.

Our standard core curriculum has no room for it.

We will also need to overcome reluctance among music faculty to learn improvisation.

The current trend of "classical" (i.e., non-jazz) improvisation such as Soundpainting will not meet the need because it has several disadvantages:

It has no coherent harmonic, melodic, or rhythmic syntax and therefore does not develop musicianship;

Audiences may find it bewildering and unpleasant;

It may adversely affect audience-building and arts advocacy because it could confirm stereotypes of music programs as weird and out-of-touch.

Playing divisions on a ground is a way for both faculty and students to get comfortable with tonal improv in a common practice language while working in an ensemble setting. It can include all instruments and singers.

What are divisions? A 16th-18th C practice of improvising upon a repeating bass line. Called divisions because of the progressive rhythmic dividing from longer notes to shorter. Can be done alone (on keyboard), in pairs, or larger groups. Similar to Chaconne, Passacaglia, Variations.

Handel Manuscript

Simpson Divisions Cover

Simpson Page on Divisions

Simpsons Dividing Melody

Simpson Dividing Bass

Pendulum Bass

Getting comfortable with note-against-note VIDEO 0:00 - 1:14

Quarters against whole notes VIDEO 1:14 - 2:07

Trading Scales 2:07 - 2:30

Romanesca

Requires hearing key changes and altering leading tone.

Simultaneous vocal lines, then other instruments VIDEO 2:30 - 4:52

Passacaglia

Hearing suspensions over the V chord. VIDEO 4:52 - 5:07

Department chair improvises a Passacaglia VIDEO 5:07 - 5:32

Passacaglia from the whole group VIDEO 5:32 - 7:40

Improvising a Romanesca in front of the department VIDEO 7:40 - 10:08

Passacaglia in front of everyone VIDEO 10:08 - END

Examples of named grounds from John Walsh's Division Flute

Practical Applications for Pedagogy

Players take turns improvising one note per bass note, then successive divisions

Players with adequate range can take turns playing ground and divisions

Lower players can "break the ground"

Go as long as possible without parallels ("parallel hot potato")

Singers can be given short phrases to make into songs

Use bass lines that suggest appropriate types of progressions and voice leading

Introduce "flip switch" leading tones

Introduce suspensions

Host a department recital for trios or quartets. Make it a game by giving them unseen basses. Integrate into history class, using basses selected from periods and cultures under current study.

Bibliography:

Martin Erhardt Upon a Ground

Christopher Simpson The Division Viol

John Walsh Division Flute