



THE UNIVERSITY
OF IOWA
School of Music

Improvisation for Classical Musicians
Syllabus
Spring 2012

025:106:001 3 s.h.
T/Th 10:30-11:45 a.m.
UCC 1 (Chamber Rehearsal Room 1)

Instructor: Jeffrey Agrell
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Office hours: TBA

Prerequisite

025:002 or consent of instructor

I would like to hear from anyone who has a disability that may require some modification of seating, testing or other class requirements so that appropriate arrangements may be made. Please contact me after class during office hours or by appointment.

Approved GE: None

Course Description - 025:106:001 3 s.h.

This course is designed primarily for the traditionally trained 'classical' musician, and provides theory and practice in beginning improvisation without an emphasis on any particular style (e.g. jazz – if you are interested in learning specifically **jazz** improvisation, take Introduction to Improvisation, 025:101:001).

Course Content

Course content will include the development of

- Aural and rhythmic skills

- Spontaneous creation of rhythms and melodies
- Use of timbres and extended techniques in expression
- Instrumental technique
- Practical understanding of harmony and form
- Experience in both solo and accompaniment roles
- Creation of short pieces as vehicles for improvisation

We will use jazz symbols and terminology for description of chords and scales, and take advantage of some jazz practice techniques, but a study of jazz styles is not part of the course. This course is designed to provide a general basis for further studies in improvisation, whether in jazz or other stylistic directions.

Soundpainting is a system of gestures used to structure group improvisation developed over two decades ago by New York composer and conductor Walter Thompson. Soundpainting will be used frequently in class because it provides immediate and nonstressful experience in creation of melody and rhythms, use of extended techniques, aural training, and solo and ensemble improvisation practice, among other things.

Course Objectives

- To provide the student with skills to enable the player to “think in music” on his/her instrument, in the same way that we express ourselves in our native language. That is, we use familiar words and syntax to invent, understand, communicate, and respond, skills that both complement and go beyond merely reciting or reading symbols that others have made.
- To develop aural skills, which will include aural recognition of types of scales, chords, forms, and melodies, and the ability to remember and play back a melodic motif or fragment in the course of improvisation.
- To be able to use various techniques to develop, ornament, and elaborate motifs and phrases.
- To develop rhythmic skills, especially being able to invent a variety of rhythms during improvisation.
- To provide direct connection of musical creativity in performance on the instrument with music theory (scales, chords, arpeggios, form, et al.) and [written] composition.
- To develop the ‘creative habit’ in the student; i.e. to learn to ‘imagine music’ and be able to spontaneously generate musical ideas for improvisation.

The student will learn to make personal discoveries and explorations of music, his or her instrument, and feelings through improvisation, as well as to create compositions that include opportunities for improvisation.

Course Requirements

- **Sound recording device.** You will need to be able to record your improvisations. Suggested are iPod with recording attachment, flash recorder. Dictaphones or other low quality devices are not recommended. Feedback from listening to recordings of your playing is indispensable. This investment in basic sound recording equipment will be a great value to you throughout your music studies.
- 2 notebooks (spiral or 3-ring) to serve as your logbooks to record comments and information on practice and responses to readings.
- Highly recommended: music staff paper, blank paper for taking notes, and a 3-ring binder to keep handouts, assignments, and written music.

Required text:

Free Play by Stephen Nachmanovitch. Available from Eble Music in Iowa City or order from www.amazon.com.

Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians by Jeffrey Agrell. Available from Eble Music or the publisher. I will give you a check for 10% of the price of this book when you show me either a purchase invoice or your copy of it with your name in ink on the cover.

Class Participation

- Students are expected to bring their instruments (+ percussion instruments) to class and be ready to play promptly at 10:30 when class begins.
- Three public class concerts are scheduled:
 - 7:30 p.m. March 1 in the UCC Recital Hall
 - 7:30 p.m. March 29 in UCC Recital Hall
 - 7:30 p.m. May 2 in UCC Recital Hall

*Reserve these dates in your (and your friends'!) calendar **now**.*

Attendance

Regular attendance is essential for success in this class. A first unexcused absence will result in the lowering of the final grade by one third letter grade. Every additional such absence will lower it by a full grade each time. Three unexcused absences means an incomplete in the course. Use e-mail or the phone to let me know *in advance* of class if you cannot attend for any reason. If you are for some (good) reason unable to let me know in advance, email as soon as possible when you are able. Absences for reason of illness require a note from a physician.

Feedback

Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor to discuss any aspect of the course at any time either in person, before or after class, during office hours, by phone or by e-mail. *These methods have been proved by long experience to work significantly better than mental telepathy.*

Assignments/Schedule

See the separate master list of assignments. **Note: there will be other assignments made along the way in addition to suit the daily needs of individuals and of the class.**

You are expected to hand in assignments on time. Late assignments are graded down a full grade per day.

If any assignment is unclear in any way, *ask the instructor (not another student) **immediately*** (during or after class, via email, phone, or during office hours). *Reporting on the day an assignment is due that the assignment instructions were not understood is not acceptable.*

Written assignments should be **computer printouts** and have a heading that includes your name, date, and title of the assignment. Always double-space and staple multiple pages (print on one side only).

•Daily/Weekly Practice/Preparation

→Note: *Normal preparation time for a 3 s.h. class is 6 hours per week.*

Improvisation is extemporaneous, but requires considerable preparation – you have to be ready for anything! How your 6 hours are used can vary, but in general you are expected to practice about 2 hours total a week on scales, arpeggios, and patterns (this can be a revised version of what you already do), plus ca. 3 hours a week improvising on your own and with other instruments (as duets, trios, quartets); plus ca. 1 hour for reading and listening from required practice time. The proportions may vary a bit from week to week, but it should all add up to around 6 hours of homework for the week. The good news is: 1) improv practice is varied and fascinating and you will enjoy every minute of it and 2) you will find that improv technical practice sessions can replace and/or supplement some of your regular instrumental practice time.

•Logbook.

You will hand in a weekly log (Logbook) of your practice & ensemble playing time each **Tuesday**. This log will contain a **detailed** record of what you worked on, your ensemble partners, time (duration), plus any discoveries you might have made along the way: notes on and responses to *Free Play* and other readings, plus patterns, licks, composition ideas, insights, ideas, thoughts, etc. See the Assignment List sheet for exact dates and the separate sheet for details.

Evaluation – Grading Basis

Attitude & proficiency: 30% (attitude [work ethic, cooperativeness, punctuality], attendance, participation in class concert performance)
Assignments & exams: 60% (Logbook, class assignments, participation in class discussions, technical progress)
Final exam will be on patterns and pentatonic scales, counts 10%. See separate sheet for details.
Plus/minus grading will be used.

Disclaimer

*This is a course in **improvisation**, i.e. musical flexibility and imagination. We are thus fortunate to be willing and able to be flexible and respond to the needs of individuals and the class in adjusting course content and assignments whenever necessary as we go. You may **expect** such changes during the semester.*

[Standard university syllabus text omitted from here on]