

Moodle modules for Improvisation Ensemble Adelphi University Spring 2012 (as of 1/4/12)

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## **Module 0**

*Course Syllabus, Grading Criteria, Assignment Schedule and News Forum*

This section contains three important pdf files: the course syllabus, the criteria for grading, and the schedule of assignments. In addition, when there is any class news - such a changes in an assignment, an announcement about a local music improvisation event, etc., the information will be posted below under the heading "News Forum," so please check for news each time you log in. There are currently 15 "blocks" on this Moodle page (blocks 0-14). Some of the blocks contain listening and reading assignments in the form of mp3 files or pdf files. Please look over all of the available Moodle material as soon as possible; the instructor will "take requests" and spend more time in class on those activities that students express interest in exploring.

Course Syllabus PDF document

Grading Criteria PDF document

Assignment Schedule PDF document

News forum

Discussion Forum

## **Module 1**

*Music for People - Return to Child*

The pdf file in this section is the full text of Music for People's book on music improvisation. What is Music for People? Take a look at the organization's website: [www.musicforpeople.org](http://www.musicforpeople.org). The instructor has been active in Music for People since its inception in the mid 1980's. Music for People offers an inclusive, non-judgmental approach to music making that is designed to create safe space for musical exploration and self-expression. Its simple structures and activities are applicable to all instrument groups and all age groups. Download and read through this book. It is a resource that we will use often during the class. Hard copies of the book may be ordered from the Music for People office.

The areas of emphasis of this class are: a) improvisation skills in solo, small ensemble and large ensemble settings; b) teaching or facilitating improvisation for others in an encouraging atmosphere; c) awareness of the role of improvisation in the music of various genres, cultures and periods of history. Page 143 shows a "checklist of skills in music improvisation and group leading." If you master everything on this page, you will be well on your way to being an inspirational teacher of improvisation. Page 42 contains a set of suggestions for how to participate in a group improvisation that is "free," with no set rules about key or rhythm. Page 150 presents a set of ten questions that can be applied to any improvisation activity, putting the activity in a context of personal musicianship (as a participant) and group leadership (as a teacher/facilitator). That will be the consistent focus of this class - we can only teach what we have taken the time to learn to do ourselves. We become teachers of improvisation by improvising, and by being mindful of the process and flow of improvisation as an art form.

Return to Child - 2008/2011 edition PDF document

Return to Child - complete with covers PDF document

## **Module 2**

### *Rhiannon - Flight*

There are a number of "music-minus-one" resources that are useful in developing music improvisation skills. These are generally recordings of vocal or instrumental backing tracks that allow the student to add on his or her own part. For vocal improvisation, the 2 CD set called "Flight" is the best resource I have found. It was put together by Rhiannon, one of the vocalists in Bobby McFerrin's "Voicestra." If you are not familiar with these artists, search them on YouTube and listen to some of their vocal improvisations. Pay attention to the ways they blend in ensembles and the risks they take as soloists. You can do that, too!

The four mp3 files below are for you to sing along with at home. The full "Flight" CD set has 22 total tracks.

pattern duets sound file

call and response sound file

long tones sound file

putting it all together sound file

## **Module 3**

### *The Darling Conversations*

The sound files in this section are from "The Darling Conversations" with master improvising cellist David Darling and composer/educator Julie Weber. In NPR fashion, their topical conversations are interspersed with snippets of solo and ensemble improvisations. The conversations are available in a three CD set produced by Clint Goss.

If you prefer listening to material rather than reading, these mp3 sound files contain the main philosophies and techniques of Music for People.

segments:

It's You! - everyone is capable of genius moments. The benefits of encouragement and the costs of feeling unworthy.

One Quality Sound - "relax into your beauty." How to make spontaneous sounds that reflect your emotional state and can be used for both musical and expressive purposes.

Vocal Timbre - one of the most profound improvisational skills is to "play what you sing."

Experiment with the roundness of sound, using open vowels in contrast with more tense or nasal sounds.

Babbling - rhythm and articulation, freedom and abandon are present in this simple technique.

Articulation - Added expressive power from having control over more notes. But any number of notes can be used musically. Be a "master of what you can control."

Sirening - in contrast with articulation of precise tones and pitches, sirening is sliding. The technique was initially used to address tone discrimination in people who described themselves as "tone deaf." Sirening along with a drone allows for the experience of a profound unison and intense consonant and dissonant intervals.

Love Your Sound - one of the main barriers to successful improvising is runaway self-criticism and the fear of criticism by others. Cultivating an attitude of self-acceptance and enjoyment of the process (rather than the product) is an important aspect of becoming open and fluent as an improviser.

Oooh Energy - the tools we have to work with as improvisors involve contrasts - high and low, loud and soft, smooth and rough, sound and silence, regular and irregular. Another set of

contrasts involves the rhapsodic quality of the sound. Oooh energy is the energy of lullabies and love songs and some prayers.

Yea! Energy - Yay energy is the energy of a cheer, a shout out, or a call for a taxi on a noisy street.

Fire Energy - Fire energy involves intense, rapid, high contrast sounds. It is the energy of passion.

One Minute Solos - Think of the one minute solo like a musical short story. Include a beginning, a middle, an end, some development, and an emotional statement worth making. Improvise one minute solos with a clock or a stopwatch as a guide.

Powerful Solos - what gives a solo improvisation the power to move others? One element is to make sure it moves you when you are playing it.

Silence - Listening is the most important of all musical skills. Think of yourself as always playing a duet with the silence around you.

Even-handed Drumming - For those of us who play instruments that favor one hand over the other, it is very helpful to develop strength and independence in the "weak" or "less experienced" hand. Hand drums such as djembes, congas, ashikos, etc. are very helpful for this purpose.

Meters - It is helpful to be taken out of our comfort zones of familiar 2-, 3-, and 4-beat meters. When we can feel meters in our body, they become natural, even when they are complex combinations such as 5s, 7s, and longer rhythms.

Tai Chi Piano - The piano can be approached as a collection of 88 bells, to be played one at a time. This can help novices approach the piano without undue worry about the complexity of the layout of the keys or the need to coordinate two hands and ten fingers simultaneously.

Solo/Drone - When you have a drone sounding constantly from an organ, a shruti box, or a musical partner, every note you play has a new meaning and a harmonic context. Soloing over a drone will help you use intonation, intervals, and tension/release dynamics as elements in your improvisation.

Melody/Hold Your Last Note - This is a simple duet/partner activity in which the soloist and accompanist roles change constantly. It is like a partner dance of movement and stillness. Play a short melody and hold your last note as a drone for your partner, who plays a short melody and holds the last note for you, and so on.

Ostinato - An ostinato can also be called a "groove," a repeating rhythmic pattern. It is the basis for most popular music, making up the bass line and the "hook." In place of a drone in the partner activity above, players can play a short melody and repeat the final few notes as a groove, providing a "bed" or a base for their partner to solo over. The partner can solo and end with their own repeating pattern. A great and simple improv game.

Melody - One quality sound, followed by another one quality sound.

A-B-A - The energy of music comes from contrasts. Improvising in ABA format capitalizes on contrast.

Improvising Classical Music - Many compositions start as an improvisation or creative spark. Classical forms such as fugue, sarabande, or chorale can be adapted for improvisational purposes. Imitating classical styles is a powerful way to internalize the distinctive aspects of that style.

Not every activity of Music for People is covered in The Darling Conversations. Refer to the Return to Child book for descriptions of activities such as Shadowing, Play What You Sing/Sing

What You Play, Play Something Familiar in a New Place on Your Instrument, Using the Descending Scale, State State and Minimalism.

#### **Module 4**

*Drones - a collection compiled by Clint Goss*

From the telephone dial tone to the 60 cycle hum, drones are all around us. Every enclosed space has its own resonant frequencies that color even the silences in that space. Drones can be produced by bowed strings, by all wind instruments and voices, and by bellows instruments such as harmoniums and shruti boxes, or bagpipes. When you visit this website, you can trigger a drone of nearly any pitch. Use these drones to sing along with, or improvise on your instrument.

Use the drones as a shruti box by triggering multiple drone pitches simultaneously. Have fun!

Clint's Native Flute Drone website

Flutopedia reference drones

#### **Module 5**

*Loopers and Improvisation in Layers*

A "looper" is another name for a digital sampler. These devices enable performers to capture phrases as they are being played live. The phrases can then be set to repeat in rhythm, forming a groove or a bass pattern or a repeating melody line. Most loopers also have an "overdub" function that permits multiple samples to be layered on top of each other, as if several people were playing at once. The early versions of such units (from 15-20 years ago) allowed only a few seconds of digital sampling. As digital memory has increased in speed and fidelity, and decreased in price, modern loopers can hold minutes of sound at CD-quality sampling rates, and dozens of layers can be added with little degradation of the signal quality. Rock, folk and jazz guitar players have been using loopers in live performances for years. Units such as the Boomerang, the Jam Man, the Echoplex and the Loop Station all perform similar functions. Find video examples of music that is constructed "on the fly" using one or more loopers. Be aware that unless the performer describes the music in detail, it will be difficult to distinguish a true improvisation from a composition with one or more improvised parts.

If you have seen Bobby McFerrin perform "circle songs," you see how a human chorus can be used like a looper. He creates a repetitive vocal part from his imagination, then quickly transfers the part to a member of his chorus. Next, he improvises over the repeating part until he finds a new part that fits with the existing one. Then he transfers the new part to a different chorus member. Eventually he may have four or more interleaved parts going.

Looped parts can be simply created on computer by copying a sound sample and pasting it into the track timeline over and over at equal spacing. This is a time-consuming task on computer when compared with the ease of capturing live loops with a looping pedal.

#### **Module 6**

*Play along with Nature's sounds*

Music for People has a saying "Silence is your Friend - You are always playing a Duet with the Silence around you." Silence is an aspect of listening. If the environment really has no sounds (as in an anechoic chamber) you can hear the sound of the blood flowing through the vessels in your ears. Silence has in it all of the objects of your listening.

Sit in as silent an environment as you can find. If you are at the beach, you will be hearing the wind and the surf, as well as the airplanes overhead. If you are in the woods, you will be hearing

the birds chirping and moving through the leaves on the forest floor, along with the wind, the squirrels, and the traffic on the nearest main street. If you are in your kitchen, you will be hearing the motor of the refrigerator.

Bring your instrument to a place where you can hear the sounds of nature. Sit in silence long enough to hear the ambient sounds clearly. Starting with very soft sounds on your instrument, begin a duet with nature. If you have recording equipment that can pick up faint sounds, record your duet.

## **Module 7**

### *Improvisation is Personal*

Why are we moved to make music? Music comes through us as a means of expressing deep emotion, as way of discharging the energy of excitement and exhilaration, and as a language of the body in rhythm and movement. In the moments of creation when we make sound for ourselves, we are not thinking, we are being our music. This can be intensely personal.

In order to help facilitate others in personal musical expression, we have to be willing to go there ourselves. This requires both emotional honesty and a safe place to express yourself. The main threats to the safe expression of emotion are the potential judgments and criticisms that can come from both ourselves and our surroundings. Find a truly private place to make your own music, away from family, roommates, friends, and neighbors. This can be a practice room, your own shower, the car, or a spot in nature away from other people. Experience your most uninhibited sounds without fear of disturbing others or drawing unwelcome attention to yourself. Some of these sounds may be no more useful than coughing or clearing your throat; other sounds may be "keepers" that you will later use for an intentional and artistic purpose.

## **Module 8**

### *Improvisation is Social*

Most of the activities in this class are designed for group music making environments.

Traditional jazz, rock, pop and folk improvisation involve shifting in and out of the role of improviser. You build your musicianship when you practice being both a reliable and sensitive accompanist and being a inspirational and powerful soloist. In Return to Child there are a few exercises that help develop a balance between soloist and accompanist skills: shadowing, call and response, call and answer, holding a drone, soloing over a drone, holding a pulse, soloing over a pulse, holding a rhythmic pattern, soloing over a rhythmic pattern, shadowing a melody, harmonizing a melody, shadowing in harmony, holding a part in a round.

## **Module 9**

### *Piano skills for non-pianists*

Piano remains the most common musical instrument in school and home settings. It is a complex instrument, involving dozens of black and white keys. It appears to require high levels of physical coordination to play with the left and the right hand simultaneously. This can intimidate many people and stop them from discovering the sonic possibilities of the piano when it is approached in a more innocent and naive manner. Return to Child contains a variety of activities that people at any age and any level of experience can use to begin gaining experience in music improvisation, using a piano or electric keyboard:

Black Key piano - the pentatonic scale has no wrong notes

Tai Chi piano - sound follows movement

the Claw - three note clusters and arpeggios

minimalism - the "looping" or repetition of simple finger patterns; the power of small changes

Boom-Chuck - simple piano accompaniment in 4/4

Bo Jangles - simple piano accompaniment in 3/4 with a descending scale

### **Module 10**

*What do we want to be able to teach school age students about music improvisation?*

1. Everyone can participate in personal music making; music is for everyone, at all levels of ability and development.
2. Music, like visual art, dance, poetry and story, is a powerful carrier of deep human emotion.
3. To improvise successfully in a group, you have to be a good listener. You do not have to play all the time. Silence is a great contribution to an improvisation.
4. Imitation is a key skill.
5. There are noble and valuable support roles, such as holding a pulse, a pattern or a drone; this allows others to have a turn being the soloist.
6. Creativity thrives in a nurturing environment and withers with criticism.
7. Music making does not have to be a competition to see who can play faster or more complicated pieces; simple, heartfelt music is a great contribution.
8. Whether it is called jamming, comping, vamping, soloing over chord changes, trading eights, or any other name, improvisation is a central aspect of spontaneous musical expression and it occurs in nearly every form of popular music.
9. As an assignment, search YouTube for examples of improvised music. Try to complete a whole "bingo card" of improvisation in many different musical styles, including vocal, instrumental, rock, jazz, blues, rap, with words, without words, solo, ensemble, American, South American, African, Indian, middle eastern, Pacific Islands, Caribbean, Native American, British Isles, modern, historical, classical, etc.

### **Module 11**

*Apps - Music becomes more and more accessible*

"when I was your age.." seriously, when I was your age, recording was a highly technical and expensive enterprise. It took thousands of dollars and hours of time to record, mix and master a song. There were social and political and financial barriers to distributing a song or getting airplay. Today, every Apple computer comes with a recording application called Garageband that has more features for recording, mixing and mastering than many of the studios I recorded in 40 years ago. A recording can be available to the world on YouTube or SoundCloud minutes after it was completed. New apps are being created every day that make music making more accessible to larger numbers of people.

What are your favorite music apps? Which do you use for amusement, and which do you use to make more serious music? Find at least one new app for "show and tell" in class. Be prepared to demonstrate how it serves your development as an improvising musician and how you might use it for teaching others.

### **Module 12**

*BoomDoPa - a set of classroom improvisation activities using Boomwhackers and African drums, by Mary Knysh and Betsy Bevan.* This 30 page booklet features group improv activities, organized by grade/age level. It includes world music grooves / patterns and interactive improv

structures, with detailed instructions for teachers. The file here is for your eyes only. If you wish to download and keep a copy for your professional use, please send \$15 to the authors.

BoomDoPa - Classroom Music Improvisation Activities PDF file

### **Module 13**

*Quotes promoting the arts (and music in particular)*

Every classroom and every teaching studio needs a supply of inspirational quotations. The files below are compilations of quotes that I have found useful. The first is from Dr. Sera Smolen, a cellist and educator in Ithaca, NY. The second is from my own book, Return to Child.

Smolen - Quotes re: music and the arts PDF document

RtC - just the quotes

### **Module 14**

*Examples of unusual instruments that promote or invite improvisation.*

The Hang drum. Is that a flying saucer? Or two woks? People ask me all sorts of questions when I take out a Hang drum and begin playing. But they are always fascinated by the sound, and they often find it impossible to turn down an invitation to play it. The Hang drum is the invention of a company called PanArt in Switzerland. It is made in several dozen different tunings and scales. The technique for playing is similar to Afro-Cuban percussion, and there are many examples on YouTube of some highly accomplished Hang drummers. One can become a virtuoso on any instrument. The most useful aspect of the Hang drum is that there is no way to play it and be "wrong." The one I have uses a pentatonic scale, similar to the black keys on the piano. Whether you strike the hammered tonal centers or you strike the Hang drum randomly, the sound is generally satisfying. When it is easy to make an interesting tone, beginners can be more quickly drawn in to the process of music making.

The Amadinda. In the movie "Throw Down Your Heart," banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck tours Africa, searching for the cultural origins of the banjo. In the course of his visits, he discovers a number of log percussion instruments, some of which are intended to be played by multiple people simultaneously. Home made Amadindas are constructed from tuned 2 by 4s, and use either a diatonic or pentatonic scale. They function similarly to some Orff instruments. The Amadinda that I have uses a pentatonic scale, and is made to be played by up to four hands at once.

Boomwhackers. These are pitched tubes, color coded to identify which note is which. They are available in diatonic, chromatic, and pentatonic sets, from long bass register tubes to short soprano tubes. Boomwhackers will make a satisfying sound whether they are banged on a wood floor, against a desk or chair, or against each other. When the pitch choices for improvising are limited, the arena for expression becomes rhythm.

Go to YouTube and find examples of Hang Drum improvisations and compositions; examples of instruments similar to the Hang Drum (the Halo drum, the Hapi drum, etc.); find examples of amadinda and balafon music; and find examples that show a variety of ways Boomwhackers can be played.