

21st Century Warm-Ups: Improvisational Exercises for Orchestras & Individuals

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As teachers, we know that practicing scales is important. And yet, most students struggle to see the point—practicing scales doesn't *feel* like playing music. Improvisation, however, can bridge this gap between technical study and music. While classical musicians and music educators often think of *improvisation* purely as *musical expression*, at its root *improvisation is just a tool*. Used intentionally, it can actively build students' musical knowledge, as it simultaneously requires critical thinking and musical awareness. (Spoiler alert: it's more engaging!) The following improvisation exercises can be used as daily warm-ups to achieve technical and musical growth in orchestras, group classes, private lessons, and individual practice routines.

Improvise In A Key

The basic concept: improvisation is freedom within constraints, allowing you to practice the act of making choices in real time. You, as the teacher (or improviser), are responsible for setting the constraints.

Avoid conflating *technical ability* with *creative ability*! It is possible for students who play at a high technical level to struggle with improvisation; it is possible for students who struggle with playing to improvise easily.

Examples of harmonic constraints:

- just one note
- the first three notes of D major
- the first five notes of D major
- one octave of D major
- all notes of D major in first position

Examples of rhythmic constraints:

- using a metronome (or not)
- slower or faster tempos
- shorter or longer lengths of time to improvise (2 bars, 4 bars, etc.)

While harmonic and rhythmic constraints are the most basic constraints, you could also tackle a variety of technical or musical challenges. Some examples:

- playing in a certain part of the bow
- using various bow strokes
- exploring dynamics or characters

Important considerations:

- choose a key signature or scale so students feel and hear what different keys sound like on their instruments
- when possible, play improvise with a drone
- in group settings, all students should improvise simultaneously so they can't hear each other individually (there is safety in chaos!)
- when you demonstrate what improvising might sound like within the constraints, give examples at different difficulty levels
- just because students *can* use a whole of octave of notes doesn't mean they *have* to use a whole octave of notes
- encourage students to work at the edge of their ability

Echoes

Echoes is an ear training exercise that can eventually incorporate elements of improvisation.

Basic structure of Echoes:

- 1) determine constraints (i.e., key signature, range of notes, length of phrase)
- 2) set a metronome
- 3) someone plays a phrase
- 4) others attempt to play it back

To incorporate improvisation, individual students can improvise the phrase to be echoed back. When done appropriately, this can be a great way for students to start improvising in front of their peers in a very small, controlled way.

Important considerations:

- encourage students to play phrases they think their peers will successfully echo

Call & Response

This uses the same structure as Echoes. But, instead of merely trying to repeat the phrase (the "call"), students improvise a "response" to the phrase they have heard.

Important considerations:

- students should try to improvise a response that matches the intent of the call

Repetitions

I created this exercise inspired by the repetition exercise in Meisner Technique, an acting approach rooted in improvisation and mindfulness.

In pairs:

- 1) one person improvises a phrase
- 2) the other person repeats it back *exactly*, quickly
- 3) the phrase is continually repeated quickly until either person decides to alter or change the phrase

In class settings, this can be a modified version of Echoes, where students attempt to copy your playing *exactly*.

Important considerations:

- feel free to add constraints if helpful for the students' technical level (e.g., only open strings, a specific key signature)
- this can be used to help students with different aspects of playing (e.g., playing loudly, playing at the frog, etc.)

Non-Linear Scales

We normally study and play scales in a "linear" fashion, moving from tonic to tonic in step-wise motion. While this allows us to play all the pitches in a key, it doesn't mimic the actual *feeling* of playing music. Playing scales in a "non-linear" fashion, finding all the notes in an improvised order, is a stimulating way to increase technical facility, awareness of fingerboard geography, and aural perception of key signatures.

Basic structure:

- 1) set a metronome
- 2) play the pitches of a scale/key in a random, non-linear order
- 3) start at quarter notes
- 4) increase rhythmic subdivisions (eighths, triplets, etc.) as more difficulty is needed
- 5) work at the edge of your ability

Note: This exercise is also known as "Continual Rhythmic Improvisation" and was developed by cellist Mike Block!

About Taylor Morris

Hailed by a class of 2nd graders as “wreely nice and kind” and “the coolest man on erth,” Arizona native **Taylor Morris** enjoys blurring the line between violin and fiddle. Strongly believing we can learn more about the world through collaboration with others, he actively pursues musical projects in different genres. Currently, he is part of Tricia & Taylor, a genre-bending violin/fiddle duo with concert violinist Tricia Park, and a member of The Sound Accord, a string sextet that creates vibrant arrangements of folk music. After studying classical violin at Arizona State University with Dr. Katie McLin, he spent four years touring with Barrage, a world-music violin troupe based out of Canada. His travels, both with Barrage and personally, have led to performances in 48 states and 13 countries with musicians from a multitude of backgrounds, including Mike Block, Hanneke Cassel, Brittany Haas, Natalie Haas, Jeremy Kittel, Lauren Rioux, and the Tetra String Quartet.

Offstage, Taylor obtained a master's in education from Harvard University and is a passionate advocate for arts education. Since 2000, Taylor's teaching has taken him into classrooms around the country, from kindergartens to colleges, including as a resident Guest Lecturer at Arizona State University. He frequently works with educators in professional development settings and has presented at the national conferences for the American String Teachers Association (ASTA), National Association for Music Education (NAfME), and at The Midwest Clinic. Cherishing his own childhood experiences at summer music camps, Taylor frequently teaches at camps around the country and directs his own camp for young musicians in the Phoenix area called StringPlay. During the school year, he is a committed private teacher with a dynamic studio of violinists and fiddlers. Additionally, Taylor is a founding co-director of the Gilbert Town Fiddlers (GTF), an extracurricular high school fiddle group that collaborates to create its own arrangements for performances. GTF students even designed and presented their own session on student-led arranging at the 2019 ASTA National Conference! Through his teaching, Taylor is ultimately on a mission to help students and educators alike experience the thrill of taking musical ownership and finding their own meaningful ways to make music.

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