

Didactics - Teaching & Practicing improvisation: Solving Tasks

Process vs. Results, Written Music vs. Improvised/Orally Transmitted Music

In improvised music, learning and practicing work differently than in classical music

Most classically trained musicians are probably familiar with a practice model that is systematic and orderly. In classical music, the music you practice is already written down. In studying classical music, you learn how to practice a given composition in an time-effective and result-oriented way. The learning content is determined by the composition (say, a certain bowing technique in bar 9, a certain position change in bar 15, etc). However, when you want to practice improvising, nothing is predetermined. This means that you can and you must choose your own content. This confronts you with some different questions: What do I want to learn? How do I want to sound? What kind of music do I want to make? What can I practice right now? And how?

At the end of a *classical* practice session with a clear, concrete learning goal (e.g. "I want to work on the first page of this Beethoven sonata, with the bowings in bar 15"), you are usually rewarded with a tangible learning success ("today I've finished learning bar 1-25! - Tomorrow I can move on to practice the bowings in bar 27"). Practicing feels systematic and orderly, you get immediate results you can check off your list.

However, after an *improvisation* practice session with more vague learning goals ("I want to learn how to improvise; at some point I want to master all position changes that could possibly occur"), the learning success is usually not as tangible ("Today I played around again, but I didn't finish learning all possible position changes; so I didn't really tick anything off my list today"). Practice feels "unsystematic" and "chaotic", you don't feel you have achieved a result. This is why, for many classical musicians, practicing improvisation - without a specific learning goal – can often feel unrewarding and frustrating.

In other words, classical musicians focus more on the result, and improvising musicians focus more on the process.

Practicing improvisation - Two basic models for learning, practicing and teaching:

Model a) Art Of The Dose

Play what you understand. Be in control.

Practice in an "orderly" way: Set yourself simple, easy-to-manage tasks or choose a single element. Make up a game-rule (spelregel) or an etude and play with it (e.g. „I only use the D-string“, or „I only use notes from the D-pentatonic scale“, or "over every chord, I play the third of that chord")

Invent a game-rule that suits you, or adapt your rule until it fits you - don't take on more than you can handle!

If you get stuck or start to strain - stop, take a deep breath and simplify your game rules! If you're bored, i.e. become mechanical or disconnected, change the game.

Practice in this mode will give you more tangible results.

Model b) Experiment

Play things you don't understand yet and explore & learn them that way. Give up control.

Be „messy“: play around, follow your intuition, don't plan ahead.

Follow your ear, follow your intuition

Practice dealing with the unforeseen!

Endure not knowing what's about to happen!

Make "mistakes"! Practice turning your „mistakes“ into gold!

Jump into the deep end and learn how to swim!

Do things that you don't understand yet; play along with recordings or other musicians, or experiment on your own.

Practice in this mode focusses more on the process.

These two models seem to contradict each other, But both modes are necessary to learn to improvise! They complement each other dialectically. Pure "art of the dose" would be one-sided - you can't really learn to swim in a bathtub. And playing only in "experimental" mode would also be one-sided - when you're constantly overwhelmed, you can't really learn either. So mix both approaches:

If you're practicing "properly", pay attention to yourself and your attention - as soon as it gets exhausting or boring, follow your intuition and change your task! Be where the "tickle" is, i.e. build your game-rules in such a way that they neither under- nor overtax you, but rather: challenge you.

When you are experimenting and you miss what you aimed to play, then figure out what it was you actually wanted to play, pick out that element and invent a practice model to work on it systematically, "properly".

Typical learning goals and learning paths of classical music and improvisation differ fundamentally - this is often confusing for classical musicians who start improvising.

So I would like to encourage you: I believe learning is essentially chaotic, and should be! So allow your practice to be chaotic and unsystematic ("experimental model") - and learn to stand it! And also play with the „art of the dose“ mode – invent your own game-rules and etudes to focus on a certain aspect. Mix the two models!