

Learning to Improvise

Students can begin to improvise with their teachers in their very first lesson. The teacher's role is to provide a safe, inviting environment that encourages exploration. To do this, the teacher plays a rich-sounding accompaniment and then invites the student to "make sounds with me" using a specific set of keys.

The teacher's part can be made of a **Pattern** (a repeating accompaniment pattern) and a **Vacation** (a contrasting pattern). Repeat the Pattern as many times as you like, then go to the Vacation. Then return to the Pattern, and cycle through the Pattern and Vacation as many times as you like. Respond to what the student is doing by varying the notes. Here are some Patterns and Vacations to try—you will hear some of these at this masterclass.

Pattern ("World Piece")



Vacation



Melody Notes

"Play with me on black keys."

Pattern ("Persia")



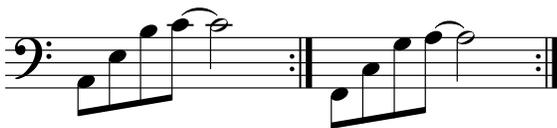
Vacation



Melody Notes



Pattern ("Reflecting")



Vacation



Melody Notes

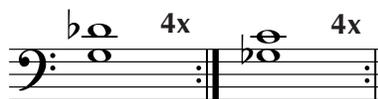
"Play with me on white keys."

The following example shows how a Pattern can be played as a trio. Here are the three parts:

Pattern ("Blues on Black")—Bottom



Pattern—Middle



Melody—Top

"Play on black keys and any a natural."

These examples are from *Pattern Play 1* © Copyright 2010 The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The Duet-to-Solo Approach

The duet-to-solo approach is the most effective way I've found to teach improvisation.

- First, play a Pattern, then invite your student to play along using a manageable set of notes.
 - Then switch places with the student and teach him or her the left-hand accompaniment Pattern. As the student practices it, improvise melodies so it is a musical experience for the student.
 - When the student is ready (this may be moments, months, or even a year later), have the student put the two hands together as you continue to add sounds. Then drop out and... the student is playing solo.
- With this approach, the student learns to create in a safe, musical, creative, collaborative, and enjoyable way.

Why Improvisation?

Improvisation is musical speech. It's spontaneous conversation. It offers teachers a rich and satisfying way to teach scales, chords, technique, rhythm, listening, style, continuity, ensemble playing (including trios and quartets), phrasing, touch, and tone. Above all, it invites us to listen deeply to tones, to respond to them, and to play directly from intuition and deep feelings. This is the essence of artistry. Why not teach artistry from the first lesson?