

# Free Improvisation: Who Needs Notes?

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Free improvisation is a helpful activity to relax at your instrument without worrying about which notes to play, to explore your feelings through music, and to find creative insights into why composers make certain musical decisions.

## My definition of free improvisation:

- There is no set vocabulary. Free improvisation is about reflecting your feelings and experiences into sound, and in turn, having sound reflect your feelings/experiences. Any sound you make is valid and meaningful—you don't need to practice a bunch of musical gestures first.
- Everyone is of equal abilities. Regardless of musical training you've received (or not), everyone can improvise. You don't need to have certain technical skills first; free improvisation draws first and foremost from your lived experience. Your most valuable asset in free improvisation is your present moment, and being in tune with your present self.
- You are enough! Free improvisation isn't about recognizing what you can't do, but what you can do in the moment, and that it (and you) is meaningful in that moment. You aren't missing any skills needed for improvisation. It's about becoming more responsive to the sounds you create and the feelings you have in each moment.

## How to Incorporate Free Improvisation into your Practice (a series of steps, scaffolded)

### 1. Get Away from the Notes

#### Goals:

- To enter a mindset where you are not worried about which notes you are going to play.
- To disorient yourself from your previous musical training, so that any concern about which notes to play doesn't kick in.
- To get out of your comfort zone, and to avoid any feelings of rejection of sounds you didn't anticipate making. Instead of stopping when you make a sound you don't like, respond to that sound with another sound.

#### Activities (adapt for other instruments):

- Close your eyes and cross your hands, and play the piano freely for 2 minutes. Record yourself and listen to what you played! You may be surprised by the musical gestures you hear.
- Play with your body parallel to the piano for two minutes, and record yourself.

- Play with your fists for two minutes, and record yourself.

## 2. Explore and Have Fun in this Improvising Mindset

### **Goals:**

- Become more familiar with the mindset from Step 1.
- Focus your attention on feelings you have (or feelings created by certain sounds you've made), and try to reflect those feelings into your instrument.

### **Activities:**

- Go to <https://randomwordgenerator.com> and click on "Generate Random Words." Look at the word, reflect on what feelings it gives you, and try to reflect those feelings into your instrument. Improvise for 2 minutes and record yourself.
- A similar activity, this time with pictures—go to <https://randomwordgenerator.com/picture.php> and click "Generate Random Pictures." Reflect on the feelings the picture gives you, and try to reflect those feelings into your instrument. If you find it difficult to not worry about which notes to play, try only looking at the word/picture and not at your hands. Stay as best you can in the mindset of Step 1!

## 3. Return to the Notes

### **Goals:**

- Use your improvising mindset in the context of any written music you're studying.
- Approach the written music as an improviser: why did the composer make the musical decisions that they did? What emotions were they attempting to reach?

### **Activities:**

- What if the composer wrote different phrasing, dynamics, or articulations in the piece you're studying? Try the piece with different musical gestures and feelings (you could even try different rhythms, melodies, and harmonies). It may give you an insight into why the composer made the musical decisions they did.
- Play the musical gestures of the piece you're playing, but without the written notes. It may sound strange and atonal, but this activity can help you to understand and have a more visceral feeling of the composers' musical gestures.

### **Make Your Own Activities!**

Free improvisation is an amazing place with no rules, except for the ones you make up. Create your own free improvisation prompts based around a certain articulation, dynamic, register of your instrument, scale pattern, etc. You'll be surprised by how much of an improviser you really are!

**If you have any questions, feel free to email me at any time (send me your improvisation recordings too!) at [gsmusic@fairpoint.net](mailto:gsmusic@fairpoint.net).**