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En route to Musical Excellence

Part VI

Improvisation

by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

Improvisational skills allow students opportunities to demonstrate their musical independence from the teacher. Once your singers have had experience with literacy games and exercises (see the December issue of the LETTERS), they are ready to demonstrate their musical independence by improvising their own exercises or pieces using newly mastered concepts. Furthermore, the use of improvisational practices with composed music helps them discover nuances that must be heard and felt beyond what actually appears on the printed page. No written notation of music tells performers everything about the singing of a piece, since the notation in a printed composition cannot always be read literally. Improvisational skills will allow students a better understanding and feeling for a composer's choice of repetitions and variations in the score, and can make available to the choir myriad possibilities for expressive interpretation.

Choir directors, too, benefit from the practice of improvisation. They develop the courage to explore new dimensions in their musicality and they in turn can help their students discover new dimensions in their musicality. Most importantly, teachers learn to balance the need for structure in their rehearsals with the need for questioning, consideration, exploration and expression.

Improvisation, according to Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, is the "study of the direct relationship between cerebral commands and muscular interpretations in order to express *one's own* musical feelings. Performance is

propelled by developing the students' power of sensation, imagination, and memory. It is not based on direct imitation of the teacher's performance."¹

Improvisation can also be described simply as creativity which comes from knowledge. It is necessary to know the vocabulary of music aurally *and* orally before improvising. Basic concepts covered in previous sections of this series (i.e. beat, literacy, movement and gesture) are important preliminary steps to improvisation because students need skills on which to draw for their original work.

The ability to improvise freely demonstrates musical independence and should be a goal of the choir rehearsal. Tools for improvisation may include movement, speech, story, song, instruments, piano or all of these combined. The possibilities are limited only by the director's imagination and courage.

Students are ready for improvisation challenges even when they know only the simplest rhythm components with which to create rhythmic patterns

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With a knowledge of song form, rhythm notation, and a melodic vocabulary of just three notes (mi-re-do), the student can compose original songs which can be performed by the rest of the choir.

It is important that students celebrate the fact that everyone is different and each will have ideas unlike another's. They should not feel any pressure to improvise for the

pleasure or approval of the teacher, peers or any other audience. Students must learn to treat improvisation practices as *experiments* and not to compare their productions with masterpieces of musical composition. Anything that produces fear or ridicule of experimental improvisation is irrelevant and harmful both to the process and creative discovery. Later in the process, critiques may be considered valuable and can lead to a sharing of values and experiences.

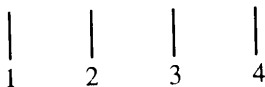
Students also must avoid simple imitation of the teacher's improvisation to prevent falling into similar patterns of speech, sound or movement thus denying the students' originality. Rather, by exercising the students' originality, the teacher can aid in strengthening their creative ability and stimulating their curiosity of how and why something is taught, thought or practiced.

The following suggestions for beginning rhythmic improvisation experiences in the choir rehearsal can be used during warm-up, as a needed change of pace, or as a fun and challenging closure. In all of these exercises, rhythmic phrases may be created using unpitched percussion and body percussion. Melodic phrases may be developed using the voice (nonsense syllables, vocal sounds), bar instruments and recorder.


There are many ways to work with just  and 

which will be both fun and challenging to choir members of varying musical backgrounds:

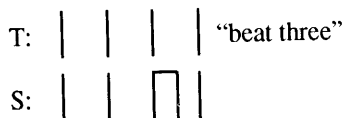
1. The teacher claps in four places across the body, speaking







2. The students mirror (clapping left to right) and speak the pattern.

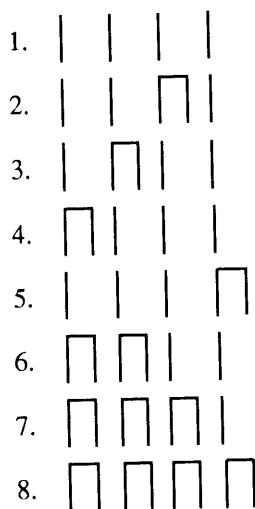
3. The teacher writes the pattern on the board and explains that 

should replace whatever beat number he/she calls out.



4. The new pattern goes up on the board and the pattern returns to    

5. Eventually, all the possibilities are written on the board, and once the tempo has been established, the students can play whichever pattern number is called out.

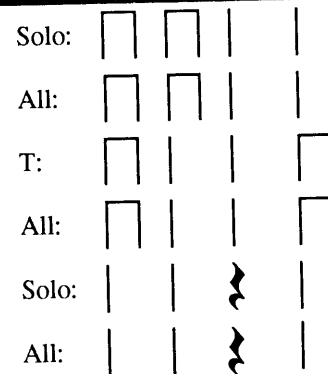


Question and answer form provides many possibilities for simple and increasingly greater demands. Use of dynamics with each pattern adds further challenge while reinforcing concepts of crescendo and decrescendo, *forte* and *piano* and so on.

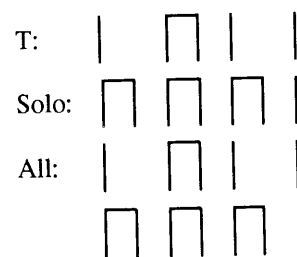
1. The teacher may play a pattern and the students echo.



2. While the students are echoing, the teacher points to a soloist to create a pattern then echoed by the choir.



When this becomes comfortable, the teacher will perform a pattern (a question), one student will create a new pattern (an answer) and the choir will perform both.



With games such as these, the students can go on to build more formal pieces (perhaps an improvised AB or a rondo form). Use your imagination to design further experiences for yourself and your students.

As an extension to the literacy exercises mentioned in last month's article, the children may use the known elements to create their own exercises to aid in the development of the choir's reading ability.

Improvisation is an essential and inspiring component of the choir rehearsal. You will discover that improvisational skills encourage spontaneity of expression in performance, and allow your students a balance between perfecting the work and letting go—between impulse and thought.

¹Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, "Rhythmics and Pianoforte Improvisation," *Music and Letters*, 13, no. 4 (October, 1932) 371.80.

Next: In-Tune Singing