ALL EARS
Improvisation, Aural Training, and the Creative Process

2003 Midwest Clinic
Chicago

Fred Sturm
Jazz and Improvisational Music
Conservatory of Music
Lawrence University
Appleton, WI 54912
fred.sturm@lawrence.edu

The teaching techniques listed below have been used with elementary, middle, and high school students; with university undergraduate and graduate students; and with lifelong learners (many in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s). They've been explored with jazz ensembles, combos, orchestras, string ensembles, concert bands, brass and woodwind chamber groups, group lessons, sectionals, and in private instruction. Many of the concepts have been borrowed from teachers of jazz, classical, and popular music; teachers of art, theater, dance, and creative writing; and even from athletic coaches. I encourage you to re-tool these methods to fit your pedagogical needs, and reinvent them frequently to keep your approach fresh and invigorated.

These techniques are accessible to both experienced and inexperienced teachers. Educators with little or no improvisational and compositional training will find the methods clear and comfortable. Teachers are encouraged to step aside and allow the students to guide and shape the techniques as leaders and facilitators, enhancing the creative process.

These methods should be taught and performed by ear, without the use of any printed materials. They should be approached modularly, not sequentially -- in any order that you see fit. Use the methods that your students respond to most comfortably, or impress upon them the importance of exercising some of the necessary techniques with which they aren't inherently at ease.

If your group has limited rehearsal time, incorporate these methods within the context of the warm-up. Encourage small combinations of players (duos are particularly effective) to experiment with the methods on their own in the practice room. Applied studio teachers can append long-established modeling techniques (physical production, phrasing, etc.) with valuable components that exercise the ear and promote pedagogical creativity.

1. "CATCH MY PITCH"
(Pitch discrimination)
Mimic (sing, then play) given pitches from any instrument/voice source,
producing pitches we hear – and pitches we imagine.

2. "FOLLOW THE LEADER"
(Call and response imitation)
Leader improvises a short (one measure?) single-pitched "call" pattern (with or
without rhythm section or accompaniment). Group responds in direct imitation of
pitches, rhythms, and all dramatic elements (dynamics, articulations, tonal
aberrations, etc.). Expand to multiple pitches, multi-measured lengths, various
tempos, different time signatures, and numerous rhythmic styles.

3. "QUESTION & ANSWER"
(Simple improvised responses)
Leader improvises a brief "question" (a simple short cell or motive). Group
collectively responds with improvised "answers" that are stylistically, rhythmically,
and/or tonally related to the "question." Paraphrase with embellishments, mirror
rhythms with varied pitches, use same pitches with new rhythms, or simply
improvise the "answer."

4. "SIMPLE SONGS"
(Executing known melodies)
Using a melody with which all participants are familiar, the group establishes a
starting pitch, sings the tune, and then performs it. OBJECTIVE: Promoting
melodious phrasing concepts and illustrating the transition from executing known
melodies to playing ideas that we "hear in our heads."

5. "EMBELLISHMENT"
(Variation of known rhythmic and melodic material)
Leader teaches a simple pattern or melodic fragment to group aurally.
Leader systematically demonstrates how to paraphrase the basic material by
adding and subtracting notes, shifting rhythmic placement, affecting articulations,
and altering note durations. Students respond individually or collectively with their
own variations.

6. "DRONES"
(Manipulating tonality, drama, and form)
Group intones upon a determined common "drone" pitch. Each individual
improvising soloist starts on the drone and plays ANY desired pitches (there are
no "wrong" notes), ANY rhythms, mixing dynamics and articulations and tonal
effects at will, then returning to the drone to conclude the solo "event," with form
and duration determined by soloist.

7. "SINGLE PITCH RHYTHM-ING"
(Expanding rhythmic vocabulary and phrasing)
Over a repeating drumset/percussion groove or constant rhythmic pattern, students collectively improvise varied rhythms, articulations, dynamics, phrase lengths, and "effects" (bends, scoops, falls, vibrato, shakes, growls, etc.) on ONE given pitch.

8. "BI-, TRI-, and QUADRA-PHONICS"
(Small cell development and harmonic outlining)
Leader establishes simple chord progression. Using 2 (mode steps 1+2), later 3 (mode steps 1-2-3), and eventually 4 (mode steps 1-2-3-5) given pitches, students learn how to assemble and unify phrases within limited improvised pitch collections. Pitches can be approached linearly by soloists and bass voices, and they can be grouped into 2-, 3-, and 4-note vertical sonorities by comping instruments (exploring various inversions and "voicings").

9. "PENTA-SONICS"
(Utilizing 5-note structures horizontally and vertically)
Group establishes a common root tone. Like reciting a major scale, students collectively perform simple 5-note major pentatonic scales (degrees 1-2-3-5-6) on the given root. The absence of half-steps (normally between 3+4 and 7+8) promotes consonance regardless of density or inversion of the five tones (ideal for comping instruments and spontaneous improvised chords by group). Simple harmonizations through parallel "planings" within the given scale are also possible. Pentatonic melodies found in ethnic musics from around the globe are ideal for these exercises in which every tonal and improvisational aspect is drawn from the 5 basic pitches.

10. "DIGITAL PATTERNS"
(Simple lines to define harmonies and establish bass lines)
Leader establishes style and key (or simple chord progression).
Group plays the root of each chord for its full duration. Eventually, group plays quarter notes on each root for the duration of the given chord. Next, 1-2-1-2 patterns in legato quarter notes are played for the duration of each chord. When comfortable for all, digital pattern is extended to 1-2-3-1 for each chord's duration. Expand to 1-2-3-5. This exercise simply spells out how "walking" bass lines are built, but on a more advanced level, these patterns can be transformed into improvised 2-, 3-, and 4-note cells used to define harmony within improvisations.

11. "STORYTELLING"
(Stressing vocabulary and language in both composing and improvising perspectives)

Group discusses parallels between musical and spoken/written languages (analogous relationships of words & notes, sentences & phrases, paragraphs & solo choruses, etc.). Students then improvise music to portray a mood, image, scene, or state of mind. Variants: Students improvise "underscoring" to a recited poem or short story; improvisers accompany an artist painting abstractly; improvisers musically interpret the movements of dancers; performers improvise the sound track to a segment of film.

12. "FREE PLAY"
(Establishing and controlling basic musical elements through free improvisation)

Without verbal communication, physical gestures, or predetermined considerations, a group of 3-4 performers improvises together freely, exploring how to arrive at a common rhythmic relationship, common tonality, common dramatic profile, and common style. Performers examine concept of order and balance in an interactive spontaneous setting.

13. "SPACE JAM"
(Promoting spontaneous group composition)

Drummer or percussionist establishes a basic groove. Bassist creates a repeating pattern that fits the groove (in any key). Keyboardist first imitates the bass line to find the tonal field, then attempts to create a suitable chordal pattern; guitarist follows/imitates the keyboardist. All others sing and then play the common tonal center, imitate the bass line, and collectively assemble an associated scale or mode to fit the bass line and comping patterns. Alter the order of instrument entry with each jam.