

Teaching Improvisation in 8th Grade Orchestra

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Curriculum Project
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Teaching Improvisation in 8th Grade Orchestra with Tango Espressivo by Matt Turner

Description: This curriculum will focus on teaching improvisation to an 8th grade orchestra to work with Tango Espressivo by Matt Turner. There are 40 students in the class and this is their first time encountering improvisation in a piece of music, although we have been doing improvisational activities since 5th grade beginning instruction.

Time schedule:¹ I see these students every day for 40 minutes. We have a concert in December where we will perform this piece. This will cover 30 classes (6 weeks) in the first semester, starting in beginning of October and ending over a week before the concert (so students feel comfortable with the solo prior to the concert).

Week 1: Rhythmic improvisation games. Students can find sounds in the classroom to use percussively and explore within the tango groove. Discussion of tango music and style.

Week 2: G harmonic minor scale technique builder, practicing over the same backing track. Listening time where we listen to solos by other school orchestras on youtube and also tango music.

Week 3: Learn the solo printed in the music, start exploring with the G harmonic minor scale over the backing track more creatively (playing with the rhythm, starting at different points in the scale).

Week 4: Students will break up into 8 assigned small ensembles with 5 members each. They take turns and improvise short patterns (one or two bars) using notes of the G harmonic minor scale while the other members play the orchestra part. At the beginning of this week, a backing track will be sent out to students so they can practice with the track at home. When we rehearse the piece, students will have a chance to volunteer to solo, either playing the written solo or improvising.

Week 5: Students will stay in their small groups, and now perform longer phrase solos. Class discussion of ways to improve a longer phrases. In the small groups, students will be asked to take turns performing an 8 bar phrase first by performing the melody and adding variations to it, then by coming up with one pattern they want to expand on throughout the improvisation, then without any parameters. When we rehearse the piece, students will have a chance to volunteer to solo, but now only for improvised solos.

Week 6: Similar to week 5, now with 16 bar solos.

¹ Practice strategies for stylistic improvisation come from Mark Kirschenmann's Jazz 220/221 classes at the University of Michigan.

Music course philosophy: My music classroom is a place where all students can grow cognitively, socio-emotionally, and morally. This environment is rooted in the idea that all students can grow through music by developing work ethics, refining fine/gross motor skills, gaining understanding of music theory, developing problem solving and critical thinking skills in personal practice, gaining skills working with other people and learning responsibilities of contributing to a group. Music helps students define their self concept and connect to their own emotions and emotions of others. Music provides an outlet for students to perform and create.

Course goals and objectives/ Benchmarks:

The goal of this unit is for all students to feel successful improvising over a 16 bar phrase in Tango Espressivo.

Objectives:

By the end of week 1:

Students will be able to improvise one bar rhythmic (clapping, tapping on instrument, stomping) solos in common time at quarter = 112 over a tango backing track on garageband. This backing track will be me recording the orchestra parts that accompany the solo in this section with an added percussion track.

By the end of week 2:

Students will perform a two octave G harmonic minor scale.

By the end of week 3:

Students will perform the sample solo provided in the music.

By the end of week 4:

Students will improvise short patterns using notes of the G harmonic minor scale in small groups.

By the end of week 5:

Students will improvise 8 bar phrases using notes of the G harmonic minor scale in small groups.

By the end of week 6

Students will improvise 16 bar phrases using notes of the G harmonic minor scale in small groups.

Requirements for facilities, equipment, supplies, budget, and scheduling:

-We rehearse in the auditorium and students can spread out into small groups there.

-Speakers for playing backbeats

-I have an office where students can come record examples or work with me during lunch or afterschool.

A list of resources to be used (books, recordings, etc.):

-Youtube recordings of orchestras playing this piece: (It should be noted I listed to about 10 recordings and only two of them had students actually playing solos that were not the composer's written solo, I suspect this is an accurate percentage of schools that encourage students to improvise with this piece)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KURW56SBe58>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQioVfBgA3o>

-Garage band backing track

-Tango music from spotify

Sample teaching strategies/ Lesson plans

Week one- Rhythmic improvisation warm up

Objectives:

- Students will creatively discover percussive sounds over a tango groove.
- Students will improvise short rhythmic patterns over a tango groove

Sequence:

1. Play recordings of tango music and give everyone in the room two minutes to explore the room and find percussive sounds they think work well with this music. Suggest things like clapping or body percussion, using stands, or tapping wood of instrument (show how to do this and how not to do this).
2. Play the tango music backing track that goes with this song. I play a rhythmic pattern, students play it back.
3. A student plays a rhythmic pattern, the class plays it back
4. I play a rhythmic pattern, the class plays anything but that pattern back.
5. Call on individuals for improvised patterns.

Assessment:

Check mark assessment to ensure every student feels comfortable improvising a rhythm over the tango backing track. I will call on 8 students every day. By the end of the week, all students should have a check in the first column.

Student name	Successfully improvised rhythm over backing track (1 point)	Needs another shot improving rhythm over backing track. (0 points)

Week 4- Improvising patterns in a G harmonic scale

Objectives:

- Students will improvise consequent phrases in a G harmonic scale
- Students will collaborate in small groups, working with others to take turns and accomplish the goal of having everyone in the group improvise.

Sequence:²

1. Play G harmonic scale together as a class
2. I play the scale with some variation, class repeats it back
3. I morph into an antecedent phrase of a G harmonic minor scale, something like G A B flat C D E flat D in a not straight rhythm. Class repeats it back.
4. I play the same antecedent phrase, class improvises a response. Everyone playing different things at once.
5. I send them off to their corners of the auditorium in small groups.
6. They take turns soloing a response to the antecedent phrase.

Assessment:

Check mark assessment to make sure everyone is on track to continue. I will check off 8 every day by walking around while they are in small groups.

Student name	Successfully improvised short pattern using notes in G harmonic minor scale	Needs another shot improvising

² Hopkins, n.d. This sequence of improvising instruction is inspired by this book.

Sample assessment procedures:

There are 6 assessments for this unit. Most of these assessments are pass/fail where the student is asked to redo if they do not pass.³

1. Check mark assessment during week one to ensure every student feels comfortable improvising a rhythm over the tango backing track. I will call on 8 students every day. By the end of the week, all students should have a check in the first column.

a.

Student name	Successfully improvised rhythm over backing track (1 point)	Needs another shot improving rhythm over backing track. (0 points)

2. Two octave G harmonic minor scale

This will be on the assignment sheet for me to sign off integrated with assignments for other pieces. Students will have a chance to play this for me in class, or they can submit on a video from home or during lunch/after school. Pass or redo.

3. Students will perform the written solo in the music. Copy will be provided to lower strings. This will be on the assignment sheet for me to sign off integrated with assignments for other pieces. Students will have a chance to play this for me in class, or they can submit on a video from home or during lunch/after school. Pass or redo.

³ Conway, 2015. The idea of having a goal based rather than grade based assessment procedure for improvisation comes from Conway chapter 10.

4. Short improvised patterns in G harmonic minor scale

Check mark assessment to make sure everyone is on track to continue. I will check off 8 every day.

b.

Student name	Successfully improvised short pattern using notes in G harmonic minor scale	Needs another shot improvising

5. Students will perform 8 bar improvised solo over tango backing track.

Not graded, but feedback in person or via online platform depending on how they submit assignment.

6. Students will perform 16 bar improvised solo over tango backing track.

I will walk around during small groups and check off individuals while they are working with groups and offer feedback. Students can also submit videos.

Reflection:

1. What were your thoughts when you heard you would get the chance to improvise in an orchestra piece?
2. How did you improve during this unit?
3. What are some things you had a hard time with during this unit?
4. Would you like more pieces with chances to improvise?
5. Were there challenges when you were working in your small groups? How did you resolve them?

References

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Hopkins, Michael, n.d., "The Art of String Teaching." Unpublished draft.

Pellegrino, Conway, and Russell. (2015). *Assessment in Performance-Based Secondary Music Classes*. National Association for Music Education.