

# Teaching Your Band to Improvise!

Dr. Christopher Oberholtzer  
Director of Jazz Studies  
University of Southern Maine  
chris.oberholtzer@maine.edu

Incorporating improvisation into your big band rehearsal can be a complex and daunting teaching situation. In this clinic, we will take a look at a number of different scenarios and useable teaching techniques that will help your students develop as improvisors.

## Manage your rehearsal time

In my experience, there is never enough rehearsal time. Good time management comes with preparation and the execution of your plan. Since working on improvisation can be a fluid process, you might allow a specific amount of time for this sort of activity. If this is an important part of your student's education, you must make the decision to donate time to teaching improvisation.

Keep the pace of rehearsal at an energetic level. I enjoy moving at a faster pace during rehearsal. I feel that the amount of ground covered is exponentially more the students are more engaged.

## Rehearsal set-up

Regardless of the band I am working with, I set up in a square for most rehearsals. In this set-up, all wind instruments stand. As we get closer to a concert, I will move to a normal concert set-up (saxes in chairs with fronts, bones on stools, trumpets stand). The rehearsal square gives me equal and immediate access to each student.

## Literature choices

Choose literature that promotes improvisation within the ensemble. There are a number of ways to accomplish this. Many published charts have sections that can be opened up for solos or you might choose a chart from a band that is famous for having a good deal of solo space (e.g., Basie, Ellington, Mingus).

Keep in mind, some literature may work better in one situation than another. What works for festival literature may or may not be the best literature to use when trying to include your entire ensemble as an improvisational voice.

## Listening assignments

Regularly assign listening to your ensemble and consider making your listening assignments multi-faceted. While listening for fun and just letting the music wash over you, should be part of the assignment, so should listening for specific musical components. For example, you might assign a tune like Basie's "One O'Clock Jump." Depending on the recording, there are a number of solos before we ever hear the melody. Ideas for specific listening assignments might include listening for the shape of each solo (what is the form of each solo), or listening for the nature of the background figures during the solos (are the background figures riff based or intricate, are they written down or improvised). Another assignment might include a question like, "how does the soloist build energy (e.g., through their phrasing, repeated notes, range, articulation...)?"

Encourage students to improvise their own solos instead of performing written solos (there are exceptions to this rule but generally, I have my students orally transcribe a related solo and then improvise in the style of that solo (e.g., listen to Ben Webster play Cotton Tail and then use your own language that is in the style of Ben Webster).

Give your students a listening assignment that includes bringing in a specific figure that will be used while they solo at the next rehearsal (they may need to transpose their figure, depending on the changes/key). Transcribing can be a fairly simple activity or a very complex activity. This can also be a way to incorporate different technical levels of assignments for different levels of players.

## Rehearsals

Promote an environment of acceptance and experiment. You want all of your students to feel that they can "go for it" instead of being judged for every note they choose.

Use all of the students, not just the stronger or receptive ones. At first, be conscious about who follows who during open solo sections. Over time, the stronger students will hopefully become benevolent leaders.

## Background figures

Before you try to build a head chart with your band, you might work on having individual sections come up with background figures during solo sections. Backgrounds are often played by non-similar instruments (e.g., reeds vs. brass...).

Building backgrounds is much like constructing your own solo. Having access to language is a key factor. This brings me back to listening.

## Head charts

If improvisation is spontaneous composition, head charts can also be spontaneous composition and improvised. Creating a head chart might be approached in this way.

- rhythm section comps and solos within the context of the exercise, don't always save them for last
- call and response (w/ teacher, w/ other students...)
- call and response examples are short and accessible (back to listening)
- use the blues, or something with relatively slow harmonic movement, or better yet, a song form tune (e.g., rhythm changes, Autumn Leaves, On the Trail, Bye Bye Blackbird...)
- include layered section riffs to add form between open solo sections
- include spontaneous background figures during some of the solos (as sections create their background figures, you might rotate through student leaders)

## Other activities

### Rhythm and articulation of the day

- have the band incorporate a specific jazz related rhythm into the above exercises (e.g., if you want them to swing hard, use triplet-based rhythms that swing hard)
- change the articulation of the above exercises (e.g., play them as a bossa or with a hard swinging feel and off-beat articulation)

### Work on phrasing

- discuss what makes a good phrase and how to execute good phrasing while you improvise
- remember, with phrasing, you are always "going somewhere, you are there or you are coming away from there"
- assign a specific shape for a 4-bar or an 8-bar phrase (each student can execute their shape as they solo)
- have two students share a phrase (student 1 plays the antecedent and student 2 plays the consequent)

## Harmonic language

The act of building harmonic language is an important process, but it can also be a slow process. Keep in mind, the language of improvisation may be learned, just as we learned our speaking language. Here are some thoughts that might work for your big band:

- write chord changes on the board (e.g., C-7 F7 BbMaj.7)
- discuss the key center and the fact that this is a ii - V - I
- start with the key center (Bb major in this case) and introduce the other modes

- have the band play the related scales and arpeggios
- have the band play a sequential pattern related to each scale
- introduce natural minor and then other forms of minor (C-Maj.7)
- select harmonic movement that is related to the music you are programming
- develop vocabulary through listening, transcriptions and exercises
- develop thoughts about when, where and how to use your vocabulary
- develop technique that allows you to use your own language

### Free playing

- take one musical item away (e.g., remove harmony only, there are no changes during solos)
- cue backgrounds, rhythms only, notes only, show the shape of the backgrounds

### Musical decisions

- allow the students to make some musical decisions about how they want to play a head chart (e.g., in the style of Basie, Maria Schneider, Artie Shaw...)
- suggest change, the nature of a big band is to be very repetitive in many ways, promote spontaneity when your students improvise

### Listening

Remember, this is the key for all of us! Through listening, we continue to develop a musical understanding of where our performing voice and our teaching voice can be.

### **Suggested Readings**

*Jazz Pedagogy: A Comprehensive Method of Jazz Education for Teacher and Student*; David Baker, (1979). Van Nuys, CA. Alfred Publishing. ISBN: 9780882844831

*The Jazz Ensemble Director's Manual*; Richard Lawn, (1986). Oskaloosa, IA. C.L. Barnhouse Company. Publisher ID: 070-1976-00

*The Teaching of Jazz*; Jerry Coker, (1989). Mainz, Germany. Advance Music. ISBN: 9783892210221

*Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide*; Richard Dunscomb and Willie Hill, Jr., (2002). Van Nuys, CA. Alfred Publishing. ISBN: 10 0757991254/13: 9780757992157

*Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz*; Ronald Carter, Wynton Marsalis, Ronald C. McCurdy, Ron Modell and Reginald Thomas, (2008). Chicago, IL. GIA Publications. ISBN: 9781579997137

*Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz, Volume 2*; Randy Brecker, Ronald Carter, Robert Knatt, Thara Memory and Rodney Whitaker, (2016). Chicago, IL. GIA Publications. ISBN: 9781622771547

*Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz for Beginning Ensembles*; Ronald Carter, Roosevelt Griffin, Ben Huntoon, Brian Logan, Rob Parton, Willis Rapp and Dean Sorenson, (2016). Chicago, IL. GIA Publications. ISBN: 9781622771769

### **Other related reading/teaching resources**

*Creative Jazz Improvisation*, 4th Edition; Scott Reeves, (2006). Cambridge, England. Pearson Publications. ISBN 13: 9780131776395

*Creative Beginnings: An Introduction to Jazz Improvisation*; Scott Reeves, (1996). Cambridge, England. Pearson Publications. ISBN: 9780133454635

*The Jazz Theory Book*, Mark Levine, (1995). Petaluma, CA. Sher Music. ISBN: 1883217040

*How to Play Bebop: Volume 1*; David Baker, (1988). Los Angeles, CA. Alfred Music. ISBN: 13: 9780739020401

### **A selected list of big bands that promote improvisation**

Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra

Walter Page's Blue Devils

Louis Armstrong and his Orchestra

Earl Hines and his Orchestra

Jimmie Lunceford and his Orchestra

Harry James and his Orchestra

Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra

Count Basie and his Orchestra

Lionel Hampton and his Orchestra

Billy Eckstine and his Orchestra

Woody Herman and his Orchestra

Stan Kenton and his Orchestra

Buddy Rich and his Orchestra

Gil Evans Orchestra

Duke Pearson Big Band

George Russell and his Orchestra

McKinney's Cotton Pickers

Benny Moten's Kansas City Orchestra

Cab Calloway and his Orchestra

Chick Webb and his Orchestra

Benny Goodman and his Orchestra

Gene Krupa and his Orchestra

Artie Shaw and his Orchestra

Duke Ellington and his Orchestra

Boyd Raeburn and his Orchestra

Dizzy Gillespie and his Orchestra

Claude Thornhill and his Orchestra

Maynard Ferguson and his Orchestra

Gerry Mulligan Concert Band

Thad Jones-Mel Louis Jazz Orchestra

Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra

Thelonious Monk Orchestra

Don Ellis Orchestra

Bob Mintzer Big Band

GRP All-Star Big Band

Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra

Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band

Clayton/Hamilton Jazz Orchestra

Buselli/Wallarab Jazz Orchestra

Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin BB

Bob Florence Limited Edition

Rob McConnell & the Boss Brass

John Fedchock Big Band

Carl Saunders Be Bop Big Band

WDR Big Band

Brussels Jazz Orchestra