



The Midwest Clinic

International Band and Orchestra Conference

How and why to include improvisation in your string orchestra

Edgar Gabriel presenter - Elmhurst College/ Harper College

December 19, 2019 3:00pm

Why

Improvisation brings a new interest in string education and creates a new kind of string student. It can inspire not only the gifted and accomplished student, but also the student who is faltering or losing interest. This new music study and repertoire is entertaining for audiences, parents and administrators and prospective new students are often gained. This is also very positive for the string orchestra director on many levels, from their own personal enrichment to the enrichment of their students, parents and colleagues.

Improvisation teaches string the students new fun skills such as swing rhythms, playing with and becoming rhythm instruments. Music theory suddenly becomes fun because key signatures, harmony and chords are used and become relevant. Difficult rhythms are understood both orally and on paper. With this knowledge students can arrange and compose their own pieces. String orchestras can arrange their own favorite songs.

Future professional string players and educators may find it necessary to be skilled in improvisation. While orchestra positions are difficult to secure and will be even harder to obtain in the future, the professional string player must be well rounded in many styles to widen their employment opportunities. Even if the current professional modern string player is not required to improvise, the skills learned from improvising such as reading lead sheets, composing harmonies on site, reading swing and pop rhythms in the correct style, memorizing songs in multiple keys, grooving with a rhythm section and proficient with microphones and electronic amplification create a much more marketable musician.

Edgar Gabriel explains why improvisation is necessary for the future of students in every field, not only music in his TEDx Talk "Improvisation for a Better Future". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18zsQbQqe1Y>

How

Introduce and encourage improvisation to students as early as possible. If they can only play three notes, then have them improvise with those three notes. Introduce pieces regularly into your repertoire that include room for improvisation. Start simple; use one scale or mode to improvise with. Don't challenge the novice improviser with complicated music theory. Unless the student is listening to jazz regularly, have them begin improvisation with rock, pop and fiddle music. Classical music can also be used since the student is much more familiar with classical music (ex. 4).

If you are not an improviser, learn how from those that do. This session will get you started to learn and teach improvisation. Many of the clinicians listed below teach privately and some have workshops and camps to attend. The best way to get started improvising is to play along with backing tracks. Jamey Aebersold is the pioneer of this method, now many can be found on YouTube and other sites. The iReal app is an incredible source for backing tracks.

Call and response is one of the best ways to get your students to improvise. Transcribing solos or songs, is necessary to train the ear for improvisation. Have your students transcribe their favorite song (ex. 5). Finally, Listening to music with improvisation is essential to good improvisation.

Improvising String Players to Listen to

There are so many, this is just a condensed list. All of the clinicians belong on this list: Jean Luc Ponty, Joe Venuti, Stephane Grappelli, Stuff Smith, Michael Urbaniak, Gilles Apap, Michael Cleveland, Mark O'Connor, Sara Caswell, Darol Anger, Jerry Goodman, Regina Carter, Dr. L Subramaniam, Zach Brock, Mark Summer, Tracy Silverman, Earl Maneein, Zbigniew Seifert, Eddie South, Simon Shaheen, Edgar Meyer

Resources

- A comprehensive list of Alternative Styles/Eclectic Strings resources, categorized into grades ensembles, genres and more will be found at the ASTA (American String Teachers Association) under TEACHING RESOURCES at: <https://www.astastrings.org>
 - If the ASTA site is under maintenance, the 2014 ASTA list can be found here: <https://stringgroove.com/teaching-resources>
 - Information for Edgar Gabriel's "String Groove" ensembles for orchestra, String Groove Books and App can be found at: www.stringgroove.com
 - An invaluable resource not found on the ASTA site is the Jamey Aebersold method <http://www.jazzbooks.com>
- iReal Pro App <https://irealpro.com>

Almost all of the clinicians below and some of the artists above have publications with improvisation and Eclectic/Alternative styles.

String Clinicians

Tim Kliphuis www.timkliphuis.com

Diane Delin www.dianedelin.com

Christian Howes www.christianhowes.com

Mike Block www.MikeBlockMusic.com

Danny Seidenberg www.dannyseidenberg.com

Julie Lyonn Liebermann www.julielyonn.com

Andy Reiner www.andyreiner.nfshost.com

James Sanders www.jamessandersviolin.com

Tom Bowling thomas.s.bowling@gmail.com

Renata Bratt renata.bratt@gmail.com

Mark O'Connor www.markoconnor.com

Randy Sabien www.randysabien.com

Greg Byers www.cellogreg.com

Mark Wood www.markwoodmusic.com

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Ex. 1

The Blarney Stone (excerpt)

Edgar Gabriel

Irish Jig

Ex. 2

Attitude (excerpt)

Rock

Ex. 3

Blue Bows (excerpt)

Swing Blues



Mozartitice (excerpt)

by Edgar Gabriel

Ex. 4

Allegro

Violin I *f* D A7 D G D G D

Violin II *mf*

Viola *mf*

Cello & Bass *f*

Vln. I 7 A7 D G D Emi A7 D

Vln. II

Vla.

CB

Ex. 5

Pop Tune

(♩ = 68)

Vln. I A B

Vln. II

Vla.

CB *f* A7 C G F