

*Into the Musical Future: Using Improvisation in Everyday Practice and Pedagogy*  
Robert Dick and Celine Pendergrast-Thackston

Getting started with free improv – why do we do it?

The thirty second, two-note study

Creativity and improvisation

Creative benefits of improvisation?

- Attending to the moment and improving focus
- Creating a non-judgmental atmosphere where we can explore
- Encouraging creativity and openness
- Connection/collaboration with others
- Amplification of emotion/finding greater nuance
- Spontaneity

Comedic or theatrical improvisation and how it can help

A few important principles from the school of theatrical improvisation:

- Don't prepare, just show up
- Say yes!
- Attend to the now
- Be supportive

Comedy improv exercises

Mirroring

Weaving/Pass the action

Yes, and

Basic improvisation exercises

- Solo:
- 30 second study
  - Equal Sound/Equal Silence (creating space)
  - Magnification
  - What's Next?

- Duo:
- Copycat
  - Mirroring
  - Equal Sound/Equal Silence
  - Musical Opposites

Group work:

- Pass the melody / Extend / Magnify
- Groupings (rhythm section, drone, solos)
- Musical Machines
- Creating a character/mood/scene

Practicing improvisationally

Pedagogical applications

Using improvisation in lessons

Improvisation in group settings

Music in a Box/Creative Practice Cards

Let's try it!

## Resources

### Musical Improvisation

Agrell, Jeffrey. *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*. GIA Publications, 2008.

Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. De Capo Press, 1993.

Chase, Mildred. *Musical Improvisation from the Inside Out*. Creative Arts Book Company, 1988.

### Theatrical and Comedic Improvisation

Johnstone, Keith. *Improvisation and the Theatre*. Theatre Arts Books, 1987. (highly recommended!)

Madsen, Patricia. *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. Harmony/Bell Tower Publishing, 2005. (also highly recommended!)

Spolin, Viola. *Theatre Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook*. Northwestern University Press, 1986.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theatre*. Northwestern University Press, 1999.

Stanislavski, Constantin. *An Actor Prepares*. Theatre Arts Book, 1989.

### Helpful Books for the Creative Musician

Bruser, Madeline. *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*. Harmony/Bell Tower Publishing, 1999.

Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way*. Tarcher Publishing, 2002.

Green, Barry, and Timothy Gallwey. *The Inner Game of Music*. Doubleday, 1986.

Nachmanovitch, Steven. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. Tarcher Publishing, 1991.

Ristad, Eloise. *A Soprano on Her Head*. Real People Press, 1981.

Tharpe, Twyla. *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. Simon and Schuster, 2005.

Werner, Kenny. *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within*.  
Jamey Aebersold Press, 1996.

Westney, William. *The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust Your Musical  
Self*. Amadeus Press, 2006.

### Websites

Improvisational Theatre Games:

[http://www.humanpingpongball.com/improv\\_games.html](http://www.humanpingpongball.com/improv_games.html)

Tom Hall's Free Improvisation:

<http://www.freeimprovisation.com>

Sarah Stiles Music (Music in a Box and other improvisational music resources):

[http://www.sarahstilesmusic.com/sarahstiles\\_home.htm](http://www.sarahstilesmusic.com/sarahstiles_home.htm)

Improvisation and the Classical Musician (Eric Edberg):

<http://classicalimprov.blogspot.com>

<http://improvclass.wordpress.com>

Music for People:

<http://www.musicforpeople.org/resources.html>

Creative Practice Cards (Jennifer Keeney):

[http://www.jenniferkeeney.com/creative\\_practice\\_cards.html](http://www.jenniferkeeney.com/creative_practice_cards.html)

International Society of Improvised Music:

<http://isim.edsarath.com/index.htm>

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# Thirty Creative Seconds -- Opening the Improvisational Door

by Robert Dick

For most classical flutists (and other classical musicians, too) improvisation is a mystery, and the prospect of delving into improvising often provokes an intense avoidance reaction that is psychologically and emotionally loaded. Improvisation is regarded as a zone of inadequacy, with failure in its purest form the sure outcome of any attempt. Why should anyone feel this way? When we see people improvising, we are not watching members of some supra-human species in action -- they are just the same as we.

I was thirteen years old when I first encountered improvisation. A fellow music camper sat at the piano and played by ear, and I was totally blindsided. Where did this come from? How did she do it? I was clueless, and my mind was totally blown when she said "I don't know, it's just something I do. My Aunts and Uncles all do this when the family gets together". I was enormously impressed by the natural way that music just flowed from her. I was sure that this was a higher order of musical talent than I had and that there was never anything I could do about it.

Why did I assume so strongly that I couldn't improvise? I had never even tried.

The answer is that because my flute teachers never mentioned my own creativity, I came to assume that I was not creative. In speaking with hundreds of flutists and other classically trained musicians over the past several decades, it turns out that this experience was by no means unique! (Hopefully, teachers are becoming ever more conscious of the effect of what isn't said as well as that of what is.) It was a combination of "life force" itself and the influence of several wonderful non-flutist, non-classical musicians who encouraged me to try to improvise. And I would like to encourage you.

The most important message I can possibly get across to the classically trained musician is this simple statement. Put your brain on "record" and your heart on "open" and consider the following:

If you are musical, you are creative.

Now creativity, like tone or technique, needs work to be developed. It is really no different and the enormous practice skills that classical musicians have at their command can easily be broadened to embrace creativity as well as re-creativity. Accept the idea that one may be virtuosic in many aspects of playing and simultaneously be a complete beginner as an improviser. Embrace the excitement and joy of being a beginner. Put aside fears of failure and the tendency to judge oneself with every breath. Relax, and now we'll start.

What does "improvisation" mean, anyway?

Improvisation is the most common form of music-making worldwide and it has countless

forms and degrees. As classically trained flutists, let's not worry about bebop, about chords, changes, modes, ragas, eastern European odd meters, etc, etc. All this can be learned later if desired. I find the best way to start is with the following simple exercise in looking into the musical future:

The 30-second, two-note study -- Often we fear playing "wrong" notes. So all the notes in this exercise will be correct. Pick any two notes, A-natural and B-natural, for example. You may play these two notes in all octaves, tone colors, articulations and dynamics, but only use the two notes you have selected. Thus no wrong notes are possible and you will be free to think about other musical aspects, directions and dimensions.

A common misunderstanding on the part of non-improvisors is the assumption that the improviser's mind goes into a Zen-like blankness and the music is "beamed in" from the cosmos. It is not that way at all. The improviser's mind is an active place in which consciousness of the immediate past and future is vivid and the image of the musical future is forming both mid-range and long-range. It's just like speaking. We know precisely what we have just said and will say next, while sentences are forming in our minds and the subjects we'll speak about in the coming minutes are taking form in a much less defined way that becomes clearer as we approach.

Developing the skill of looking into the musical future takes practice, so we'll start with a length of time that is easy to imagine, 30 seconds. Visualize an arc of energy that travels 30 seconds into the future and seek to feel that length of time. Playing for precisely 30 seconds is not the goal here, but we want to be close, so a 30-second statement that lasts fifteen seconds isn't acceptable, nor is one that goes way overtime. If you find that, at first, you don't have a feel for the time, look at a clock while you play. But please get away from the clock as soon as you possibly can. You really won't need it for very long, if at all.

The next step is to choose a spirit, a subject for your improvisation. In choosing your subject, speak with yourself in any way that you like. It's your internal dialogue and its nature is entirely up to you. There are no "wrongs". You might want to approach the improvisation technically, saying "I'll start with short notes and gradually lengthen them." Or you may wish to be imagistic and think of a kitten pouncing on a leaf as it blows through a garden. Or a space journey. or the taste of a fabulous cup of tea. Possibilities are infinite. What matters only is that you define something to yourself so that you can begin to play with a musical concept already formed and you are in tune with the spirit of how you would like the piece to be. Then, prepared with your chosen pair of notes and a sense of 30 seconds, play.

It is very important, and much more rewarding, if you concentrate on where you are going musically without judging yourself and your flute playing while you play. This will only divide your energy and lead to frustration. The time to reflect is after your 30-second piece is over. Think about it. How much of your image was portrayed, how much of the spirit, the feeling was expressed? Don't say "@\$%^# nothing!!!"; Some of

your objective was realized. Congrats.

Now spend 30 seconds thinking about what you played and how you could make it better. Then play for another 30 seconds. Repeat this cycle of thinking for 30 seconds, then playing for thirty seconds five times. You'll be surprised at how much music there is inside of you. Remember that negative internal dialogue drains your energy and that constructive dialogue gives you energy. Focus on how to improve your piece. Does it need a clearer ending? What is a good way to make one? Stuff like that. After five go-rounds it will be time to choose a different pair of notes for another five cycles, or it will be time to practice something else. I recommend five cycles because the mental and emotional work required takes us past the surface and makes us look deeper within ourselves. It sometimes happens that a 30-second piece gets better over the first two or three times and then gets worse. Don't quit! It just means that your concentration on this type of work needs strengthening, and there is only one way to develop that strength. It's the same way you'll get to Carnegie Hall.

By trying out lots of different two-note pairings, a sense of the nature of each pair will develop. Should you want to express anger, (it's part of life and art, too), then the perfect fifth with its sense of stability, nobility and repose would be a problematic choice, while the angular major seventh can provide more spikes and sputters. That same major seventh, when played lyrically, can truly communicate longing, through its implied need of resolution.

When you do the 30-second study daily -- it does take only five minutes, so hold the excuses, please -- you'll find to your delight that after some days, two notes won't be enough and 30 seconds will feel confining. Begin opening up the parameters by allowing yourself more notes; one at a time usually works best. Opening the time in gradual increments also is often the best path. Take a full minute, then gradually more. As long as you can sense the time frame you've chosen, you're ready to handle it. Many times experienced improvisors will discuss only length before starting to play together. "About ten minutes? OK." may be the entire pre-performance, or pre-rehearsal planning.

Improvising with other players can be the most wondrous of musical experiences. A real key to making this work is a bit of defining before playing. Time frame, spirit, musical materials. In order for an improvised piece (or a composition for that matter) to work, it has to be about something, and that means that it also is not about everything else. So it can be very effective for a group of flutists to decide, for example, that they'll use key clicks only to begin, then move to breath sounds and whisper tones, then staccato notes, etc. This will work much better than "Let's go!" until you have garnered enough experience.

Remember that, in group improvisation, each player does not have to play all the time. If you don't know what to play at a given moment, stop and listen to what the others are doing. Let them inspire you to answer them. Above all, when you improvise either alone or with others, play what you are singing inside. Avoid "finger playing" where you don't know how you will sound before you play.

A few “rules” can also be helpful. Stravinsky said that once he had defined his parameters, his “do’s and don’ts” for a piece, he was free. You might want to be careful about some classical habits that will surface. I deeply feel that the “no scales” rule is truly helpful for classical flutists to find the music within themselves and not fall into pre-programmed patterns. It is also vital to keep your ears, mind and heart on the music you are playing and not be distracted by your flute playing. There is plenty of time to focus on tone and technique when you practice daily studies -- improvisational practice is about music, not the details of flute technique.

Another little exercise to complement the 30-second study is this: sing a phrase, a simple phrase (and don’t worry about the quality of your voice, just enjoy the feeling of singing), then play an answer to the phrase, also short and simple. Make your dialogue at least ten sung phrases and played answers long. As you do this over days, weeks, months, your phrases will get more interesting and so will the “conversation” you’ll have with yourself.

I’ll close now by wishing you the joy and the sweat of the interior musical journey. Once begun, you can take yourself to places that you may have believed impossible. The 30-second study is just a start. Wherever you choose to go in your improvisational journey is a valid destination. In time you may well want to develop your skills and add to your musical dimensions by learning one or more of the systems of music that incorporate improvisation such as the Blues, Indian music, realizing the figured bass in Baroque music, Rock, Jazz... It’s a big universe out there, and inside of you.

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