When Words Create Music: The Spontaneous Art Song Workshop and Its Value in Teaching Improvisation

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Improvisation exemplifies a valuable teaching tool in the music theory classroom. In addition to getting students out of their chairs and moving, improvisation activities allow students the opportunity to apply knowledge by experimenting in a musical context. Some students struggle more that others with improvisation, however, stating they feel they are either "doing it wrong," or they simply don't know what to do, and a few suggestions offered in the moment about how to improvise better are insufficient. The Spontaneous Art Song (SAS) workshop is a pilot workshop designed to help this body of students feel more confident with improvisation. As a result of the workshop, students are more confident improvising; consequently, they gain a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts when improvisation is used during instruction. In this article I show how the workshop benefits them, and speculate on its value as a pedagogical tool.

Introduction

Many music educators would agree that improvisation exemplifies a valuable teaching tool, not only for musical performance but for music theory as well.[1] Depending upon the activity, improvisation not only gets students out of their chairs and moving, but also allows them to apply knowledge they have acquired and "grow into" new concepts by experimenting and playing with them in a more musical context than just listening or writing. However, some students struggle more than most with even the most basic improvisation exercises, stating they feel they are either "doing it wrong," or they simply don't know what to do, and a few suggestions offered in the moment about how to improvise better are insufficient. The Spontaneous Art Song (SAS) workshop is a pilot workshop I designed to help these students in particular feel more comfortable with improvising. Workshop participants report they feel much more confident while improvising at its conclusion; consequently, they gain a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts when improvisation is used during instruction. After framing hesitancy in improvisation in its historical, philosophical,

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1 *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 27 (2013) features improvisation in a number of articles, and William Porter's "Why Is Improvisation So Difficult?" serves as a centerpiece for the volume.

and pedagogical contexts, I will discuss the SAS workshop in detail, showing how it is especially beneficial for this particular group of students, and speculating on its value as a pedagogical tool.

Context: Why Is Improvisation So Difficult?

Improvisation is an efficient teaching technique because it requires a synthesis of visual, aural, and tactile modes of presentation and learning. Improvisation is one part of the national standards set forth not only by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), but also by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) at the post-secondary level.[2] At my own institution, music theory instruction is frequently supplemented with improvisation activities.[3] Improvisation activities not only help students learn particular concepts, but teach them about their own individual learning strengths, helping them become better students and musicians "[Improvisation]," states Frank Barrett, "...helps to construct a context that allows one to differentiate relevant aspects from trivial; these [improvisation exercises] are situations that allow one to develop the ability to acquire skills, *to learn how to learn*" (emphasis added).[4] Barrett further asserts that improvisation has even more far-reaching consequences:

> ...the situated, vulnerable body, including emotions, plays an important role in one's capacity to make sense, constructing a context that allows one to differentiate relevant aspects from trivial. Plunging into activity, throwing oneself into a situation and making passionate commitments, sensing responsibility, noticing consequences – these are the ingredients necessary for the development of competence and identify formation.[5]

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2 The 2015-2016 NASM handbook for accreditation lists improvisation as one of the five core components that any accredited school of music must include as part of its curriculum. Furthermore, NASM recommends that students should be able to "continue to develop improvisational skills whether as an aspect of composition, musicianship, or performance studies" (emphasis added). https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/11/NASM_HANDBOOK_2015-16.pdf, accessed 12 October 2016.

3 Our pedagogical philosophy is deeply rooted in the Walden School tradition, part of the musicianship program devised by Grace Cushman of the Peabody Conservatory Preparatory Program. This program is still used at The Walden Young Musicians Program, a summer program for students interested in improvisation and composition in Dublin, New Hampshire; and also in programs for adult musicians and music teachers offered by Avivo (avivo.com).

4 Barrett (2010, 157).

5 Ibid.

The openness to vulnerability that Barrett describes requires trust in oneself and a willingness to try new ways of learning. Systematic reluctance, however, extends beyond normal performance anxiety or fear of the unknown. In my 24 years in the classroom, I have noticed that students who are exceedingly hesitant tend to have one of two experiences. In the first, the student begins an improvisation but stops almost immediately, or otherwise exhibits behaviors of discomfort, such as laughing or shaking their head. When asked why they did not continue, s/he will respond that it was wrong or bad, that what they performed was completely incorrect at worst and amateurish at best. In the second, they say that they simply do not know what to do. For this student, the problem is larger than simply picking certain notes to play: their confusion rests in not even knowing how to begin, and this confusion increases exponentially if a second player is involved.

No matter what surface behavior of anxiety is exhibited, the underlying causes have largely the same roots, some practical, some philosophical. One cause is the notion that the authority for musical authenticity and quality resides in the printed page: straying from the score is unacceptable. The rise of the conservatory in the early nineteenth century, as well as availability of scores and instructional materials, led quickly to a solidification of a musical canon in which the printed page became more of the authority than a musician's artistic instincts, a problem which remains today. "Aspiring art musicians," explains Robin Moore, "[consequently] became increasingly self-conscious in the performance of canonized works, and tended to rely more heavily on the interpretive advice of influential music professionals, rather than untutored instinct."[6] Indeed,

> Most musicians confined themselves to the note-for-note playing of scores by a handful of composers, who somehow seemed to have access to the mysterious and godlike creative process. Composition and performance progressively became split from each other, to the detriment of both, and the eye became the dominant sense regarding art music production in the industrial age.[7]

Things have not changed significantly from that time period, and government programs have added to the problem. Both the recent No Child Left Behind and Race To the Top initiatives, for instance, have standardized testing as their centerpieces. As public school teachers, my colleagues and I were continually frustrated that individualized instruction had largely been thrown to the wayside and we often "taught

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6 Moore (1992, 73).

7 Alterhaug (2010, 110).

to the test" in order to meet particular goals or mandates. Students are not oblivious to this tension. They are increasingly coming to college not just underprepared in general for college-level work, but nervous as well: they have been told, essentially, that there is one and only one correct way to do something, and students no longer see experimentation and "mistakes" as learning opportunities, but indicators of failure. As improvisation is a real-time experiment with what works and what does not, it is easy to see why students would view it with suspicion and even dread.

While high-stakes testing can affect how a student views experimentation, nonconstructive critique can prove to be detrimental as well. A student who has been told they are not improvising correctly may believe that improvisation is another of Alterhaug's "mysterious and godlike process[es]," like composition, that he or she will simply never possess.[8] Rather than consider a single instance poor, the student is left with the impression that the entirety of their skills are lacking, which runs contrary to Frank Barrett's mindset of positivity: "Musicians assume that there is an affirmative potential direction in every interaction and every utterance. They assume that everything that is happening—even the most blatant 'errors'—makes sense and can be a possible springboard for an inspired musical idea.[9]

One of the simplest explanations for why students claim they do not know what to do is that s/he may never have had much opportunity to practice improvisation in the past. At the K-12 level, instruction is becoming more consistent, but in my experiences at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels, students report that they may not have gotten instruction on how to improvise as part of their high school band, choir, or orchestra programs. In the case of band and orchestra, public school instruction may not begin until the fourth grade, and instruction in improvisation may be inconsistent at best.[10] Furthermore, I have observed that many students do not tend to get "serious" about music until later in middle school or high school, and may not have been raised in a musical environment where improvisation was part of daily musical living. These students are not unlike the new population of bourgeois musicians that arose in the early nineteenth century: having grown up in conditions where improvisation was

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8 Ibid. Perhaps I myself would be less hesitant to improvise had my high school jazz band director told me, after my one and only performance as the pianist for the group, that I was destined to become a great church musician.

9 Barrett (2010, 155).

10 In my first teaching position in my home state of Kentucky, students started band in seventh grade, and neighboring systems began in sixth. Nearly all school systems with string programs began instruction in fourth grade.

not part of the fabric of everyday life, this population turned to other means, such as instructional institutions or guides and manuals, to learn how to do something that musicians who served in aristocratic settings passed from generation to generation.[11] Consequently, improvisation is a learned skill, rather than a habit learned earlier on.

Pedagogue Bjørn Alterhaug describes the thought process of successful improvisors as "…organiz[ing] their flow of experience 'on the spot,' where, in the best possible case, the past, present and future melt together in ecstatic moments."[12] These successful performances are, furthermore, "based on a high state of readiness, bodily experiences, internalized skills and practice."[13] Barrett translates this state of readiness into action: "As opposed to the mechanistic world view, the lens of improvisation views humans as active, striving, creating agents."[14] Systematically reluctant students do not lack natural talent or skill, but are genuinely unsure *how* to create, to embody Alterhaug's state of readiness. If we as educators use improvisation as a vehicle of teaching the simplest of concepts, how can those skills already be internalized and practiced? Alterhaug and Barrett both point to active participation of the student in the creation of music through improvisation, and a willingness to rely on prior knowledge and aural experiences as guides. If not lack of talent or skill, what is it that these students lack? In my experience, I find that it is a lack of understanding of the rules of improvising, of what are acceptable ways of interacting musically, alone and with others, in order to create something anew.

The Spontaneous Art Song Workshop

I designed the Spontaneous Art Song (SAS) workshop, a two-hour structured activity in which three of Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening*® pieces serve as preparatory exercises to learning the rules of interaction in improvisation, such as leading and following, etc. These newfound skills are then applied as groups of two to three are guided into free improvisations using haiku texts. I will explain each of the components of the workshop in turn.

The 25 participants are all undergraduate current or former music majors. All of the participants are either currently enrolled in, or have already completed, Music

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11 Moore (1992, 71-72).

12 Alterhaug (2010, 121).

13 Ibid., 114.

14 Barrett (2010, 153).

Theory and Ear Training I, and were invited to participate either through flyers posted throughout the music building and by e-mail via their theory instructors, if they were currently enrolled in written theory.[15] Students begin the workshop by completing an initial questionnaire asking how much they agree or disagree with a number of statements about improvisation. These statements fall into three categories:

A) Experiential: Has the student received any instruction at all in improvisation, whether in the jazz idiom or not, as part of their middle school, high school, or college band, choir, or orchestra programs? They are also asked if they had attempted improvisations in the past and been told "they were doing it wrong."

B) Opinion: Students are asked how much they agree/disagree with statements about what constitutes music and musical sounds (e.g., "Music must have a beginning, a middle, and an end," or "Any sound may be musical.")

C) Self-assessment of skill: Students rate their own ability level and confidence, both as individual performers and as group members.

Statements from categories B and C are presented again in the form of a post-workshop questionnaire, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this paper.

The first of Oliveros' *Deep Listening*® pieces we perform is "All Or Nothing;" see Example 1.[16]

"All or Nothing"

Listen to everything you can possibly hear in the whole field of sound both inwardly and outwardly. Expand your receptivity to the field of sound by defocusing your ears as you would your eyes for a wider visual field. After a few minutes, at a given cue, such as a preset timer bell, without premeditation express some pitch or sound that you are hearing at the exact instant of the cue. Your reaction time should be instantaneous so that you become aware of what you vocalized slightly (milliseconds) after your all or nothing response. Then recover your expansive sound field and continue listening.

-1990

Example 1
Pauline Oliveros, "All or Nothing."

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15 Since this is a voluntary activity, the number of participants in proportion to the entire population of music majors at my institution is somewhat small, but is still representative of that population. There is a mix of education, performance, and music general studies majors, as well as 3-4 students who are no longer music majors but still actively participate in music activities, such as band, choir, and orchestra.

16 Oliveros (2013). All reproductions of Oliveros' scores appear courtesy of the Pauline Oliveros Trust.

In "All or Nothing," students sit or lie down on the floor in any comfortable location and position, eyes closed. I sound a bell approximately once every 40-45 seconds, and students may create sounds with the body (such as clapping their hands or tapping a foot on the ground), not just the voice. We perform each piece twice, each performance lasting 5-8 minutes. After the first performance, we discuss what the students noticed, what they liked, and what they didn't. After the second performance, we note what things changed for them, both positive and negative.

This piece teaches several crucial concepts. First, students learn to listen more deeply for and to external and internal sounds. The workshop is held in the band room, a relatively sound-insulated space; students do not have the usual aural stimuli one might expect in a music building, yet students often comment that they noticed far more sounds than they would have anticipated. Second, this deep listening piece involves the student *immediately* and makes him or her acutely aware of a wide sound field and to listen actively: "Deep Listening is active," says Oliveros. "What is heard is changed by listening and changes the listener. I call this the 'listening effect'."[17]

Even if the student considers this piece simple or basic, it is musical training nonetheless. Indeed, Oliveros considers it essential: "How we listen creates our life. Listening is the basis of all culture," she states. "The quality and flexibility of listening skills is the foundation of musicianship. The essence of musicianship is the ability to discern the least change in pitch or tempo and relate that discernment to a field of ongoing sound or musical relationships."[18] Because students are not following a score, they are mindful of their role as performers; consequently, they begin to trust their ear, which modern musical culture says we should not trust or value.

The second piece is "The New Sound Meditation," shown in Example 2.[19] As before, we perform the work two times.

In this piece, students take this new sense of listening and apply it to how they interact in a group. I have observed that systematically reluctant students are afraid of causing someone else to make a mistake. Now that students are more confident in responding, they are more willing to risk both following someone else's lead, as well as be the instigator of a new sound. Keith Sawyer calls this "collaborative emergence," which he defines as "group processes in which collaborating groups are unconstrained,

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17 Oliveros (2000, 37).

18 Ibid., 38.

19 Oliveros (2013).

"The New Sound Meditation"

Listen

During any one breath

Make a sound

Breathe

Listen outwardly for a sound

Breathe

Make exactly the sound that someone else has made

Breathe

Listen inwardly

Breathe

Make a new sound from that no one else has made

Breathe

Continue this cycle until there are no more new sounds.

-1988

Example 2
Pauline Oliveros, "The New Sound Meditation."

resulting in unexpected creative solutions."[20] Performers learn several vital skills in this exercise. First, they create all artistic parameters, such as texture, dynamics, beginnings and endings of sections and indeed, the entire piece. They learn how to lead in an improvisation, experimenting with creating new musical gestures and hearing their musical gestures being imitated. They learn to listen through what can be a dense musical texture, select a gesture that appeals to them, and repeat it without fear of it being "wrong." Second, they learn how to shift roles, leading in one instant, following in the next: they do not have to be one or the other. More confident students jump in immediately, making the first sound that other people recreate, and less confident students can join in by repeating a gesture without having to first create one. Just as these students become more confident that they are not, in fact, destroying the musical ebb and flow of the piece, leaders of the group also learn to be patient followers.

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20 Sawyer (2010, 140).

The final Oliveros piece is "Angels and Demons;" see Example 3.[21]

"Angels and Demons"

Angels represent the collective guardian spirits of this meditation.

Demons represent the individual spirits of creative genius.

Angels make steady, even, breath-long tones which blend as perfectly as possible with the steady, even, breath-long tones made by other Angels.

Demons listen inwardly until sounds are heard from their own inner spirits. Any sound which has been heard inwardly first may be made.

During the course of this meditation, Angels may become Demons and Demons may become Angels.

Begin by just listening for a few minutes until the spirits move.

-1980

Example 3
Pauline Oliveros, "Angels and Demons."

This is easily the most conventionally "musical" of the three Oliveros pieces in the workshop: students use only vocally-produced pitches and discover what sort of sounds can blend with other sounds. Standing in a circle with eyes closed, workshop participants learn quickly how to control group dynamics, as well as "speed," influenced by the number and rate of entry of individual singers, simply by listening carefully to what is going on around them. As before, leaders often make the initial musical gestures, but then step back and allow others to lead while they follow. The result is a true piece of music with all participants sharing equally in its creation.

While each of these Oliveros pieces bring workshop participants closer and closer to their conceptions of "real" music, "The New Sound Meditation" and "Angels and Demons" in particular teach additional concepts. In "All Or Nothing," I am in control of when the students respond to whatever sound stimulus they hear in any given moment, and the rules given by Oliveros are incredibly clear: listen and recreate the sound you hear, given a particular sound cue. The directions for the other two pieces, however, are much more vague and require students to participate in the piece with

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21 Oliveros (2013).

more of what Frank Barrett would call a "jazz band mindset": "It [a jazz band] is a form of social organization that produces order with little or no blueprint, it is organized from the bottom up: individuals have personal freedom to take initiative and operate on their own authority (their own imaginations) guided by the constraints of the task, the conventions of practice, and the enactments of other players."[22] Students are aware of their constraints (create a new sound, recreate someone else's sound), and the conventions of practice (in this context, sounds produced by the body), and the enactments of other players is what creates the piece in the first place.

Students also learn that improvisation does not have to be musical in the sense that students perceive it must be: neither Oliveros nor I even use the term "musical". Performances of "Angels and Demons" are particularly haunting because they are not traditionally musical. Tones pile upon other tones, half steps and whole steps apart, and students influence consonance and dissonance by manipulating vocal qualities and volume: a minor second sung with great support and at *piano* can sound infinitely sweeter than a major third performed at *forte* and a rasping quality in the voice, and students notice this effect immediately. Furthermore, the concept of what music "should" sound like is removed, the traditional barriers to improvisation that I have described in the previous section are also removed, since there is no reliance on a printed page. None of the anchors of traditional tonal music are in play, and if they appear, they are coincidental and are released; the internal references to the canonic works as models are removed. For instance, if students somehow create a major triad in a performance of "Angels and Demons," it would not be considered wrong or incorrect, but it does in fact sound incongruous, and students look around the room and smile, recognizing what occurred. Similarly, if students try to force themselves or others to create traditional structures such as triads during the course of the piece in an attempt to be "correct," the effect is instantaneous: the tension level rises, and students begin to drop out and be silent as the expectations of what is correct and incorrect surface once again.

The culminating activity is "Spontaneous Art Song." Created by Patricia Plude, former Executive Director of The Walden School and current Director of Avivo, it is included in its entirety in the Appendix. Workshop participants gather in a circle at the piano. Each person performs at least once as a pianist and once as a singer. The pianist performs a single interval ostinato with one hand. The singer, two places to the pianist's right, sings a "one-breath tone" that sounds nice with the pianist's drone. The one-breath tone is simply a single tone from "Angels and Demons." Plude encourages

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22 Barrett (2010, 154).

the singer to "not to think too much, rather just to savor whatever tone emerges and the way it interacts with the pianist's sound world," an implicit reminder that what is happening is not being measured or tested against a standard. The pianist's only musical cue is to be mindful to release the ostinato with the singer. Participants move round-robin around the piano until we have reached the beginning of the line again.

This simple interaction between one pianist and one singer expands slowly and methodically: the singer changes his or her one-breath tone into a one-breath melody, and is encouraged again not to think too much about what is right or wrong, but to create a sound world with the pianist. Instrumentalists may also perform a one-breath tone and one-breath melody with the piano as well.

In the last part of the activity, the pianist and singer create "spontaneous art songs," using haikus as the text. As Plude points out, they are ideal since they are short and very vivid. Students are given no parameters for performance. They can sing the haiku straight through, they may repeat or focus on certain lines or words of the haiku, or they may simply use it as an inspiration to move in another direction entirely; for example, in a haiku about the wind, the singer may simply choose to sing sweeping vocal lines on a neutral syllable indicative of wind. Instrumentalists are invited to form a trio with the singer and pianist as well, and also have no prescribed rules for how they must perform.

Post-Workshop Questionnaire and Discussion of Findings

Students complete a second questionnaire following the workshop, with only the statements about general opinions and self-assessment remaining. They are presented verbatim from the first questionnaire, and a free response section appears at the end. Students' perceptions on improvisation and their own abilities change radically over the course of the workshop. The changes in perceptions are summarized in Example 4, and are shown as percentages.

vStudents' opinions on both their own abilities and what constitutes a correct musical sound change drastically over the course of the workshop. Statements 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10 concern the student's comfort level with certain tasks and scenarios. Before the workshop, students conveyed a fair amount of discomfort with situations that involved improvisation. Following the workshop, however, these numbers drop considerably, with students now agreeing that they would be comfortable improvising, both on a text that they can read and translate immediately into a musical work as implied in statement 3, and would feel comfortable using a text merely as an inspiration for

something completely new as implied in statement 4. In both statements, the number of negative responses decreases sharply and increases positively when we compare pre- and post-workshop questionnaires. Statement 10 concerns a student's comfort level in figuring out the underlying chord progression (or, in this case, an intervallic ostinato) and creating a melody to appear over the accompaniment. Free responses reflect a new-found relaxation and comfort with the texts, stating "I trusted the pianist to set the tone and I would follow," and "I just floated through the haikus focusing on what sound would work next." Statements such as these reflect a new-found comfort and trust both in themselves and a partner in improvisation.

Statements 5 and 6 directly address the student's fear of making mistakes or causing others to make mistakes, one of students' primary fears. As individuals and as parts of groups, workshop participants feel much more confident in their own abilities and much less fear about doing something that would be considered a mistake. The percentage of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I am afraid I will play or sing the 'wrong' note" increased 8.7%. While this is a mild increase, it is striking that, before the workshop, 17.4% of students agreed with the statement very strongly, while after the workshop, that number had decreased to 0%. Fear of causing a ripple effect as a group member also decreased sharply, as the number of students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement that "if I am working with a partner (or am in a small group), I am afraid I will do the 'wrong' thing and cause my partner to make mistakes" increased by 26.1%. 13% of students strongly agreed with this statement before the workshop, while afterwards, like the statements about individual mistakes, the number had decreased to 0%. Student free responses again reflect that increased confidence: "[The Oliveros pieces] made it easier to enter into the music because *no sound could be a wrong sound* (emphasis mine)." One student noted that the Oliveros pieces made each successive entry into a new sound environment "easier because there are no wrong notes." "[The Oliveros pieces made improvisation] easier, you don't think too much what's your next move or if it's approved by somebody else. It's just there, alive." Students became "less afraid, everyone makes mistakes (I witnessed it) and nothing is wrong … so mistakes aren't even really mistakes."

Statements 7, 8, and 9 refer to students' attentional priorities during improvisation. Responses indicate that the students' field of focus has increased to include other group members, and they are also more comfortable listening to others for inspiration on what to do next. Students note they become less concerned with their own individual contributions to the improvisation and more concerned with the

Statement	Pre 1 "strongly disagree"	Post 1	Change	Pre 2 "disagree"	Post 2	Change	Pre 3 "neither agree nor disagree"	Post 3	Change	Pre 4 "agree"	Post 4	Change	Pre 5 "strongly agree"	Post 5	Change
1	4.3	4.3	0	26.1	4.3	-21.8	26.1	13	-13.1	26.1	43.5	+17.4	17.4	30.4	+13
2	4.3	4.3	0	21.7	8.7	-13	39.1	13	-26.1	21.7	47.8	+26.1	13	21.7	+8.7
3	13	4.3	-8.7	26.1	4.3	-21.8	17.4	17.4	0	43.5	39.1	-4.4	0	30.4	+30.4
4	13	4.3	-8.7	26.1	0	-26.1	30.4	26.1	-4.3	21.7	39.1	+17.4	4.3	17.4	+13.1
5	13	21.7	+8.7	17.4	17.4	0	17.4	21.7	+4.3	30.4	26.1	-4.3	17.4	0	-17.4
6	4.3	21.7	+17.4	26.1	34.8	+8.7	26.1	21.7	-4.4	30.4	13	-17.4	13	0	-13
7	4.3	0	-4.3	0	39.1	+39.1	47.8	39.1	-8.7	43.5	13	-30.5	0	4.3	+4.3
8	0	0	0	26.1	8.7	-17.4	30.4	21.7	-8.7	34.8	52.2	+17.4	4.3	8.7	+4.4
9	0	4.3	+4.3	8.7	17.4	+8.7	17.4	30.4	+13	56.5	43.5	-13	13	0	-13
10	4.3	4.3	0	30.4	8.7	-21.7	30.4	30.4	0	30.4	56.5	+26.1	4.3	0	-4.3
11	0	0	0	13	4.3	-8.7	4.3	13	+8.7	47.8	30.4	-17.4	21.7	43.5	+21.8
12	17.4	21.7	+4.3	34.8	21.7	-13.1	21.7	30.4	+8.7	17.4	21.7	+4.3	8.7	0	-8.7
13	30.4	30.4	0	52.2	34.8	-17.4	4.3	17.4	+13.1	13	0	-13	0	0	0
14	30.4	52.2	+21.8	47.8	43.5	-4.3	13	4.3	-8.7	8.7	0	-8.7	0	0	0

Statements:
1. I feel comfortable improvising in general.
2.   I feel comfortable improvising on my primary instrument in any given situation.

Example 4
Changes in Student Opinions And Self-Assessment.

3.   I feel comfortable with improvising on a new text. (I read a text, and I make up a melody singing or otherwise using that particular text.)

4.   I feel comfortable with improvising on an inspiration text. (I read a text, but make up a new but similar text and   improvise on that, or I take the spirit of the text and use that as a basis for my own improvisation.)

5.   I am afraid I will play or sing the "wrong" note.

6.   If I am working with a partner (or am in a small group), I am afraid I will do the "wrong" thing and cause my partner to make mistakes.

7. I am primarily concerned with/focused on my own contribution to the musical texture.

8.   When I am improvising, I am just as focused on other players/singers and specifically what they are singing/playing.

9.   When I am improvising, I am primarily concerned with/focused on the melody I am creating and making sure it "goes" somewhere.

10. I am comfortable figuring out the "point" of a chord progression or melody and making sure I can create a melody that "gets there."

11. Any sound may be musical.

12. Music must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, like most pieces of traditional "classical" music.

13. Music must be comprised of pleasant sounds in pleasing combinations only or mostly.

14. If the voice is part of a mixed ensemble of voices and instruments, the voice must have the melody.

Example 4 (cont'd)
Changes in Student Opinions And Self-Assessment.

music the group makes as a whole. This concern for the group directly correlates to the decreased fear of doing the wrong thing alluded to in the previous statements.

The final four statements gauge students' perceptions on what music is supposed to be. Music instruction, as I have indicated, has largely become the teaching and learning of a very specific body of works in such a way that straying from the printed page is discouraged. Not only does this approach foster the idea that there is one and only one correct way to perform a musical work, but it also suggests that music should always sound and be a certain way. For college-aged performers, this ideal is epitomized in the works they study, often Classical-era pieces where the norms of this body of work are the standard for all other genres and types of music. It is not surprising, then, that students would disagree with a statement such as "any sound may be musical." In this context a wrong note in, say, a Mozart piano sonata, would be considered most un-musical. This perception of how music "should be" is not limited to pitch materials, either: it applies to musical texture as well. Thus, some students agree with the statement that "if the voice is part of a mixed ensemble of voices and instruments, the voice must have the melody." All of these notions about what music should sound like change over the course of the workshop, with students indicating a broader idea of what constitutes a musical sound. The percentage of students strongly agreeing that "any sound may be musical" more than doubles after the workshop, from 21.7% to 43.5%. One student stated that "[the Oliveros pieces] made it easier

because all types of sounds were fair game and there were no intimidating restrictions. I felt like I could try anything and any sound that popped out would be welcomed." Students also felt less strongly after the workshop that if the voice was involved in a musical work that it had to have the main melody, with no student agreeing with that sentiment by the end of the workshop. Overall, students came to appreciate the creation of new sound environments: "I became much less afraid of improvising. The activities were simple to follow, did not single anyone out, and created an environment that was creative, relaxed, and enjoyable. I believe we often forget how natural it is for us to improvise and create a sound environment."

On returning to the regular theory classroom, students reported anecdotally that their perceptions about what was expected of them during improvisation had changed dramatically. Because students learned to view improvisation as an experiment rather than a performance in and of itself, they were more able to focus on the concept being taught through the improvisation activity, rather than the activity itself. Students remarked to me that they felt like they had more time to enjoy the improvisation activities occurring within the classroom and to take in music theory concepts through performance rather than be concerned about what they sounded like as individual performers.

The SAS workshop presents an important step in creating a space in which some of the notions about improvisation may be challenged. Because workshop participants are shown in incremental stages through Oliveros' pieces how to listen to one another, how to lead or how to follow one another, and how to make music in not the most traditional way, their perceptions of what improvisation is and how they themselves do it begin to change as well. Students' faith in their own abilities increase dramatically over the course of the workshop for a number of reasons. First, they create music not only with instruments, but with their entire bodies, freeing them from the "rules" of tonality. Second, while we are working from a score, there are never any indications that the performer "must" do things a certain way, again freeing the performer from the limits set on them by a musical score. Third, students are simply free to explore an aspect of their musicality which they may never have been able to access. All of these factors contribute to the student's sense of musical flexibility, musicianship, and level of preparedness. In the weeks following the workshop, students continue to report that they feel much more relaxed about improvisation exercises they are working on as part of their theory classes, and not only do they enjoy them more, but that they feel less afraid of making mistakes, freeing them to explore the concept they are studying through improvisation more deeply. As a result, students are able to gain

more from the improvisation exercises than they would if they had not been shown how to engage with the very activity designed to help them learn. The SAS workshop could serve as an opening activity for any ability level, but especially for first-year students, paving the way for more meaningful interaction with musical concepts in the music theory classroom and beyond.

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Appendix: Spontaneous Art Song, by Patricia Plude

Spontaneous Art Song

Begin by standing in a circle and performing several short renditions of Angels & Demons from Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening*® Pieces. (It helps to have built this form previously, but if this is not possible, no worries—just start now!)

Gather the group in a circle around the piano, one person sitting on the bench as the designated "first pianist," everyone else standing. The designated "first singer" is the person two positions to the pianist's right. The circle will rotate counterclockwise so that each person has a chance to be the pianist and each person the singer. (Designating the singer as two positions to the right of the pianist allows the pianist to have one turn off before he or she must become the singer).

Invite the pianist to create a drone by playing one interval, in one hand, repeatedly. Invite the singer to listen to several repetitions of the drone and then to put a "one breath tone" (as in Angels and Demons) into the sound world created by the pianist. Invite the singer not to think too much, rather just to savor whatever tone emerges and the way it interacts with the pianist's sound world. Encourage the pianist to be sensitive to the singer's breath and to create an ending as the singer completes his or her tone.

Rotate and repeat until everyone in the circle has had a chance to be both pianist and singer.

Incrementally build the complexity of the improvisation parameters by playing with the following:

(Repeat or skip steps as appropriate to the group).

- Invite the pianist to create a more complex drone by using two hands, a different interval in each hand.
- If there are instrumentalists in the group, invite them—when it is their turn— to put a "one breath instrumental tone" into the pianist's sound world.
- Invite different tempi, dynamics, and character into the drone.
- Invite the pianists to play with their intervals in some way, adding a metric/ rhythmic texture that will create more of an ostinato rather than a drone.

At some point in the steps above, expand the improvisation by inviting the singer or instrumentalist to create a "one breath melody." Encourage the soloist to begin with a tone as usual, but then to move in and around that tone without thinking too much

about what they are doing.

- Repeat this step as seems appropriate, allowing more and more sophisticated melodies to emerge.

When the group is comfortable with one breath vocal or instrumental melodies and two-interval drones/ostinati, introduce text. Haiku work well because they are short and usually quite vivid in imagery. It will have helped to have "played" with text in advance through other improvisation forms, but this is not necessary.

Create "Spontaneous Art Songs" by inviting a singer and a pianist to work together. The singer will choose the text; the pianist will set the initial sound world. Consider developing the improvisations through the following incremental steps:

- Invite the pianist to consider changing one or both intervals of his or her drone/ostinato during the improvisation, but to be sensitive to giving the singer ample time to settle into one sound world before shifting it.
- When the group is ready, move to trios: a pianist, a singer, and a supporting instrumentalist.
- When the group is ready and willing, expand the performing ensembles further. If there are two singers or two instrumentalists, it can be helpful to designate a lead and a back up. Remind the improvisers that the more people are involved, the less each will have to do. Sensitivity to the overall sonic world, texture, and dynamic interaction will be important.
- Invite instrumental interludes within the form of the song.

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