

A Musical Safari: An exploration of Improvisation and Composition through the eyes of an MTAC Tour Guide.

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In your musical journey, you probably have found that much can be gained by exploring new things along the path. As your Tour Guide on this musical safari, I recommend stops at six destinations. This is simply the path I've chosen for the tour. Feel free to begin your travels or disembark anywhere during the safari. In the process, you may even discover new destinations not listed here. The important thing is this: to continue the musical journey.

Destination One: Get off here to learn a new way to incorporate Improvisation in your lessons.

Marilynn Carstens, the Founder of the MTAC Improvisation Program, says "what improvisation is truly intended to do is allow our students to bring forth their own unique music... -- our task is to call forth the music that is within each one of them and to honor their interpretations. It is not about their copying what we do. It is about our honoring what they do."

Students can develop their creative talents by improvising for as little as 1 minute each day. *The Improvisation Syllabus and Guide (ISG)* and *Games and Activities for Improvisation* provide assignments that help bring forth that unique talent within each student. You may photocopy the assignments from these two books, available from the state office (1-800-834-3340). Both books include Levels Prep through Advanced, and students may improvise from any level (for example, Level 9 students can improvise from level 1, and gradually move up into the higher levels). Each page has several assignments listed that can be used by your student from week to week. You may use these to begin teaching improvisation now.

The improvisation themes for past years have been **The Earth and the Sky, Holidays, and California History**. The theme for 2007-2008 is **The Four Seasons**, based on Vivaldi's violin concertos. **The Four Seasons** and other selected assignments on the website will be used for this year's Improvisation Celebration Recital at the 2008 State Convention. These assignments are listed on the MTAC website. Go to www.mtac.org and click on Improvisation, then click 2008 Convention Improvisation Assignments to print **The Four Seasons** assignments and copy them for your students. There is one page of suggestions for each season. Each day the student plays the assignment, it may be different – and that is fine, because this is improvising! Anything they play develops their creativity – they will discover the sounds they like best. All you have to do is hand the student the **Theme page** from the MTAC website and let them choose one suggestion for that week. Enjoy what they play for you. If it doesn't sound the way you would express it, ask them to explain their sounds and it will become quite evident why their piece sounds as it does. IT IS THEIR CREATION – not yours!

The State Improvisation Program includes:

Improvisation in Certificate of Merit™ (optional) – Students prepare a short improvisation to play during their CM evaluation. Improvisations are not rated by adjudicators.

Improvisation Evaluation – Students send in a recording on cassette tape or CD and will receive a written evaluation including suggestions for musicality, as well as constructive comments.

Improvisation Celebration Recital – Students selected from the recording on cassette tape or CD are invited to play in the Improvisation Celebration Recital at the State Convention. In addition, they will prepare at home for the Improvisation Activities listed on the state website.

Improvisation Showcase Recital – Top-level improvisers will be chosen to perform in the Improvisation Showcase Recital. These students will play their prepared improvisation, as well as improvising “on the spot” in the Showcase Recital.

Destination Two: Get off here if you wish to use improvisation in Certificate of Merit™.

Any improvisation can be used in Certificate of Merit™. Improvisation is not rated -- it is merely acknowledged by the adjudicator that the student has performed a "prepared" improvisation. Though comments are not required by adjudicators, adjudicators may offer comments. Improvisation must be completed within the evaluation time limit of the appropriate Certificate of Merit™ level. When registering the student on-line for CM, click the “Improvisation” box near the bottom of the screen before submitting your student registration.

Destination Three: Get off here if you would like a student to have their Improvisation evaluated and receive written feedback. In conjunction with the evaluation, the student may apply for the Improvisation Celebration Recital or the Improvisation Showcase Recital at the 2008 State Convention.

Students who wish to apply for participation in the Improvisation Celebration should prepare an improvisation using any resource or idea to develop the improvisation. The student will play the improvisation and make a recording of it, either on cassette tape or CD, and submit the recording and the appropriate Application Form in April of 2008. The student's improvisation will be evaluated, and if the student desires, it will be considered for the State Convention Improvisation Recitals.

Each year there is a theme for the Improvisation Celebration. The theme for 2007-2008 is **The Four Seasons**, based on Vivaldi's violin concertos. The assignments for the theme are listed on the MTAC website: go to www.mtac.org and click on Improvisation, then click on **The Four Seasons**. You may copy them for your students – there is one page of suggestions for each season. The sample activities for the 2008 Convention are also listed so students may use these in their practicing at home. Students who are selected to participate in the Improvisation Celebration Recital will play their prepared Improvisation which was sent for evaluation, and will participate in the activities and assignments listed on the website for 2008.

In addition to the Improvisation Celebration Recital, top-level improvisers will be selected to perform in the Improvisation Showcase Recital, demonstrating their ability to improvise “on-the spot.”

Destination Four: Get off here to learn one way to start teaching composition.

When your student improvises a catchy tune, ask him to notate it. Ask him to write one measure a week -- check it to suggest corrections, before he writes the whole piece with the possibility of numerous notation errors. A correction in the rhythm in measure 1, for example, will help him to write correct rhythms as he proceeds through the piece. It's a great learning tool to help students better understand how to write music, and also to pay more attention to details in the music they practice after writing their own composition! MTAC has an additional resource for use in teaching composition: Student Composition Workbooks are available from the MTAC State Office.

Destination Five: Get off here if you would like to learn more about helping students notate their music.

If you as a teacher feel uncertain on how to assist your student in notating, here is one great resource: *Essential Dictionary of Music Notation*, by Tom Gerou and Linda Lusk (published by Alfred, \$9.95). It's spiral bound and 4 1/2 by 11". For example, look up the word "beams" and you will find that it shows examples of connecting beams to the stem, how to add multiple beams, direction and slant of the beams depending upon note placement, and cross-staff beaming (with 12 pages of examples). Another good test to check for correct notation is to play the student's piece to see if it's readable (notes aligned, correct note values, etc.). Check with the student to see if it sounds right.

Destination Six: Get off here if you would like to submit a student composition for evaluation in the Composers Today program.

Ask your students to start now, writing one measure a week, and they will have a composition ready to enter in the Composers Today Evaluations by the February 2008 deadline. For more information, contact your branch CT chair or go on-line to www.mtac.org and click on Composers Today, then Evaluations Information and Forms.

A sampling of Composers Today programs:

Evaluations – Students submit a manuscript of an original composition for evaluation by adjudicators. Compositions are rated on a scale from 1 to 5.

Symposium Recital – Students with high ratings in the Evaluations are selected to perform in the Convention Symposium Recital.

Young Composers Guild – Students in grades 10-12 or in college who have shown exceptional talent in composition are recognized with a 5-year membership and performance opportunities.

Enjoy your musical safari through Improvisation and Composition!