

Teaching Improvisation

Beginning students can begin to improvise with their teachers from the first lesson onward. The teacher provides a safe environment that encourages exploration. To do this, the teacher plays a rich-sounding accompaniment, then invites the student to “make sounds with me” using a specific set of keys.

The teacher’s part can be made of a **Pattern** (a repeating accompaniment) and a **Vacation** (a contrasting pattern). Repeat the Pattern as many times as you like, then go to the Vacation, then return to the Pattern. Cycle through the Pattern and Vacation as many times as you like. Start playing and then say to the student, “Play with me on black keys.” Respond to what the student is doing by varying your part.

Duet Pattern (“For the Joy”)



From *Create First! Duet 1* published by Two Streams Press.

Vacation

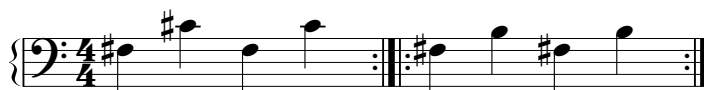


The Duet-to-Solo Approach

The duet-to-solo approach is probably the most effective way to teach improvisation because the student learns to create in a safe, musical, creative, collaborative, and enjoyable way.

- First, play a Pattern and then invite your student to play along using a manageable set of notes.
- Then switch places with the student and teach him or her the Solo version of the Pattern. As the student practices the accompaniment, improvise melodies so learning is a musical experience.
- When the student is ready (this may be moments, months, or even years later), ask the student to put the two hands together. Continue to add sounds at first, then drop out so the student is playing solo.

Solo Pattern (“For the Joy”)



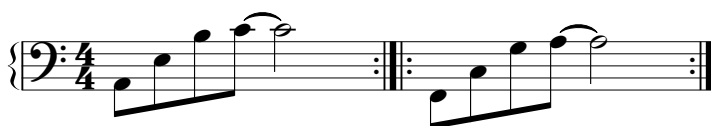
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Vacation



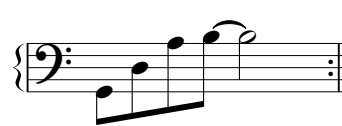
Here’s another favorite Pattern, this one for a more experienced student. When playing a Duet with a student, respond to what the student is doing with your right hand while playing in A minor.

Duet and Solo Pattern (“Reflecting”)



From *Pattern Play 1* published by Frederick Harris Music.

Vacation



Melody

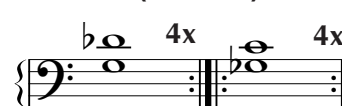
“Play with me on white keys.”

The following example shows how a Pattern can be played as a trio. Here are the three parts:

Pattern (“Blues on Black”) (bottom)



Pattern (middle)



Melody (top)

“Play on black keys and any a natural.”

From *Pattern Play 1* published by Frederick Harris Music.

Why Improvisation?

Improvisation is musical speech. It’s spontaneous conversation. It also teaches scales, chords, technique, rhythm, listening, style, continuity, ensemble playing (including trios and quartets), listening, phrasing, touch, and tone.

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