



Music Teachers' Association of California®

What is Improvisation?

Improvisation teaches techniques that enable students to become complete musicians – artists that have both technical skills as well as spontaneous creativity and self-expression. The goal of this program is to encourage students to create their own music by applying their musical vocabulary, technique and theory skills and express musical ideas to audiences or fellow performers in real time. Students are encouraged to explore familiar classical idioms as well as non-classical styles such as jazz, ragtime, blues, and boogie.

Improvisation was once part of the skillset of the great classical composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn, and others. Baroque keyboardists used the figured bass notation to improvise choral accompaniment, and cadenza sections in solo concertos were improvised by soloists in classical music. Over the last century, improvisation was embraced and developed by jazz musicians and it is an integral part of the jazz performance. The well-established rules and structural basics of improvisation in jazz studies are the basis for this Improvisation Program.

Improvisation is, loosely defined, “something created spontaneously.” By definition, improvisation is not written out, and it should vary each time it is played. Although the performance may be similar, improvised music is never exactly the same. An air of spontaneity must always be present in the performance. Often, what starts as improvised music develops into an arrangement, or a composition, as the piece is rehearsed and polished over time. While this is an excellent form of music creation, it is not a true improvisation and should not be considered as an example of a performer’s improvisational ability.

This program requires that the students perform compositions, which must contain a designated section of improvisation. In this section, the performer must demonstrate a spontaneous creation of their own musical ideas in an appropriate artistic style based on the melodic, harmonic or rhythmic motifs found in the selected material.