



Music Craft

Improvising and Arranging



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Music Craft: Improvising and Arranging

"In Jazz, improvisation isn't a matter of just making any ol' thing up. Jazz, like any language, has its own grammar and vocabulary. There's no right or wrong, just some choices that are better than others." - Wynton Marsalis

The artistry of an instrumentalist or vocalist may be attributed to innate 'musicianship' and natural talent - an ear for musical pitch and a sense of rhythm - but the fundamental control and development of outstanding technique is a common characteristic of the finest professional musicians.

In Western music history, early examples of improvisatory performance practice can be found in vocal and instrumental genres from the Renaissance era. The characteristic rhythms of Renaissance instrumental music used long phrases without a strict meter (the measurement of beat and time). Since the Baroque period, keyboard performers have improvised using expert knowledge of diatonic harmony (major and minor keys). In particular, Baroque harmony was notated using a system of numbers under the bass line, known as *basso continuo* or 'figured bass', and keyboard or instrumental bass performers (e.g. cello) improvised harmonic changes in live performance from this system of notation. In the Classical period, solo concerti were written with deliberate sections for solo 'improvised' cadenzas (typically in the first and second movements of three-movement works). Significantly, amateur musicians from the Baroque to Romantic musical eras (pre-twentieth century) were highly accomplished with a level of technical skill akin to today's professional musicians.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advent of jazz was attributed to African cultural influences and musical characteristics in southern USA. The oral tradition and improvisatory style of African music performance contributed to the stylistic elements of the early jazz styles of New Orleans and Dixieland combos. The skill of solo improvisation is generally acknowledged and celebrated in a wide range of jazz genres (including Swing music from the Big Band Era, to 'bebop' and 'cool jazz' combos). It is respectful and in fact, expected that audience members will applaud a soloist in a combo or stage band after an improvised solo. The vocal art of improvisation is known as 'scatting' and Ella Fitzgerald is known as one of the best 'scat' singers of her time (post World War II). Jazz vocal 'scatting' involves creating spontaneous melodies using wordless syllables. Significantly, jazz instrumental and vocal solos demonstrate expert knowledge of scales, arpeggios and modes; artists are celebrated for high-level improvised melodic solos that successfully follow harmonic chord changes in jazz forms.

As world-renowned trumpeters, composers and educators, both Wynton Marsalis and James Morrison regularly coach young performers to listen to any and all styles of music as much as possible, to discover sounds, influences and styles from western and non-western cultures.

"Find the best teachers, listen to the finest playing & try to emulate that. Be true to the music."
- Wynton Marsalis

In this [article](#) and interview, James Morrison provides his advice to young students of jazz:
“So for a Jazz musician the first thing is to listen. Listen all the time. It’s like learning a language. You can’t learn Russian out of a book if you’ve never heard a Russian speak ... So in Jazz I tell them, yes do the book study do the reading. It speeds things up but you’re actually going to learn it from listening to it. It’s a language and so the first thing is to listen, after then it’s do it a lot.”

The skill of arranging is part of the work of a composer. Many professional musicians have a high-level of competency to transpose musical works into different keys (for example, to adapt a violin piece for viola), or to transcribe music aurally to perform on selected instrument/s. Published works from any century are often arranged for different purposes, such as reducing a full orchestral work for chamber ensemble, or to edit music for a film score.

Recommended Videos

[Mood Indigo at Melbourne Recital Centre](#)

[Meet Your Local Heroes: Joe Chindamo and Zoë Black Part I](#)

[Meet Your Local Heroes: Joe Chindamo and Zoë Black Part II](#)

[Keith Jarrett: The Art of Improvisation](#)

[Jazz at Carnegie Hall](#) (19 videos)

[Robert Levin: Improvising Mozart](#)

Humanitas Visiting Professor in Chamber Music 2012

Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge

[Baroque Performance Practice](#)

Recommended Teacher Resources

noteable.com.au

Creating New Stuff 2 - Creative Composition for Every Music Classroom

Good Stuff - Digital Edition for the Teacher

