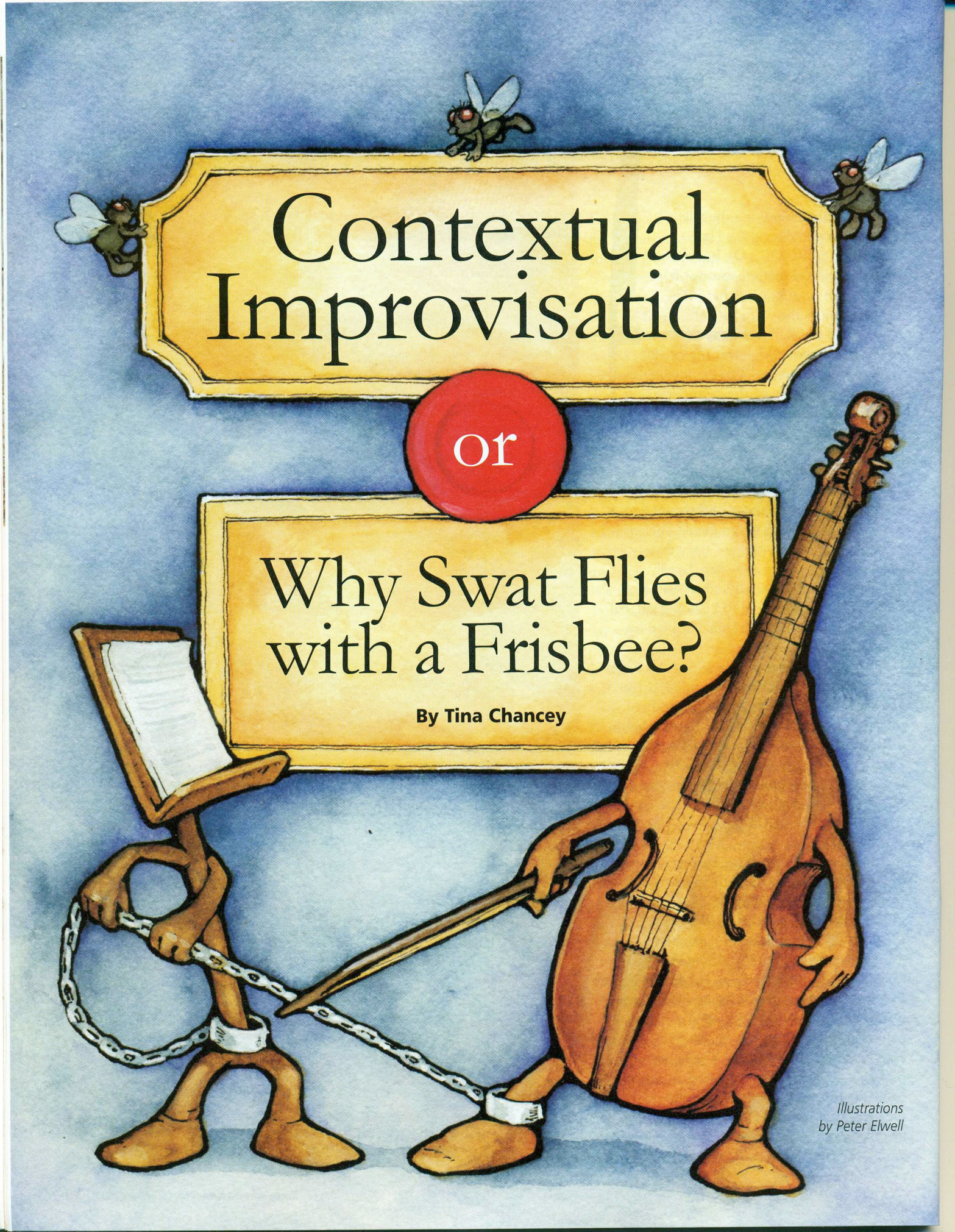
Contextual Improvisation
or
Why Swat Flies with a Frisbee?
By Tina Chancey
Illustrations by Peter Elwell

Modeling your improvisations on written music chains you to the page and shackles your creativity

Overheard in a mythical bar: "Tomorrow I'm going to do a spot of brain surgery with this knife and fork. As a psychotherapist, I know how the brain works, and I've got my old medical school textbooks to help with the hard parts."

It's patently obvious that kitchen utensils are the wrong tools for surgery, and even if our dangerously clueless therapist had the right ones, he hasn't been trained in how to use them. Reading a textbook is one thing; performing surgery is another.

So, extending this metaphor to the practice of improvisation, why do we expect ourselves to excel using the wrong tools, without training in the right ones, while relying on knowledge of treatises rather than hands-on practice?

Like other classical musicians, early musicians are primarily trained to interpret written music. Written music, or text, is our departure point, our anchor. Naturally, when we're asked to improvise, we judge our improvisations by comparing them to what we know – written text.

Understandable, but misguided. Written music is a carefully crafted *final product*, while improvisation is a *process*. Centuries of perfect improvisations recorded and preserved after the fact, from "Istampita Isabella" to Ortiz's *recercadas* and Bach's *Musical Offering* have surely been edited for publication.

Spontaneous improvisations seldom sound composed because the performer doesn't know in advance what's going to happen. But we're taught that they should, and people take it as a personal failure when they don't. Even though most early music repertoires require some improvisation, we either abdicate, leaving it to continuo players and the relatively few virtuosi who seem to be born with that special improv gene, or we fake it by writing out divisions, memorizing them, and playing them back.

This article isn't designed to teach you how to improvise in five easy steps. It's meant to shift your point-of-view by suggesting a different model for understanding improvisation, listing the new and repurposed tools and skills needed to make that model work, and including a few exercises to give you a jump start. Reading it can give you a practical foundation for a comfortable, creative improvisation practice.

Process-driven

So, imagine a new model for improvisation that is process-driven, not text-driven; collaborative, not soloistic; fluid, not fixed.

If you think people won't enjoy improvisations that aren't as complex as composed music, you've got it wrong. People don't watch improvisations (notice I'm saying "watch," not "listen") to be impressed, they watch them for the same reason they watch sports: to see what happens. Anyone can read the final scores in the paper the next day; the fun part is being along for the ride. In this model, a good improv isn't necessarily clever or showy, but it must be absorbing, heartfelt, and spontaneous. Flashy virtuosity is only one kind of successful improv. Have you heard bluesman B.B. King? He can make a 12-bar solo out of three notes, but what expressive notes! You can improvise without being a virtuoso.

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Collaborative

You already excel at one form of group improvisation, conversation – spontaneous, unrehearsed, interesting, and above all, collaborative. We're used to thinking about improvising as a solo, but in this conversational model, you've got company. All sports are collaborative; even in non-team sports like boxing, tennis, golf, and figure skating, athletes have coaches and trainers, sparring partners and doubles partners. In music, an improviser has access to all sorts of collaborations; she can interact with the other players or with the guidelines of the particular improv style she's doing – or, more abstractly, with the response of the hall or even with the resonance of her own instrument. In this model, when you improvise you're not alone.

Fluid

Most of us practice in order to minimize surprises, and the ultimate surprise is the mistake. Yet, fluidity embraces mistakes – they're a natural part of a spontaneous process (what ball player never strikes out?). Mistakes teach students what they still have to learn; in performance they keep improvisers fresh and listeners interested. How do we learn to treat mistakes diagnostically and use them in the process? We train.

Think trapeze. What skills do trapeze artists practice? Like any group involved in a fluid collaborative process, they practice the basic moves and figures first, and then they rehearse possibilities (read, mistakes). They learn how to respond to every conceivable scenario. And just in case, they have a safety net.

Without a piece of music in front of us, what's our safety net? Comfort with the process; trust in our collaborators; a healthy appreciation of mistakes; experience working the guidelines; and practice filling in those guidelines using re-purposed tools and new skills.

Guidelines

Let's get a few definitions out of the way. What is music at its simplest? For our purposes, "a sequence of pitches in time."

Guidelines give shape to that sequence of pitches. They're a series of choices made by the composer, the performer, or by default. Once they're set,

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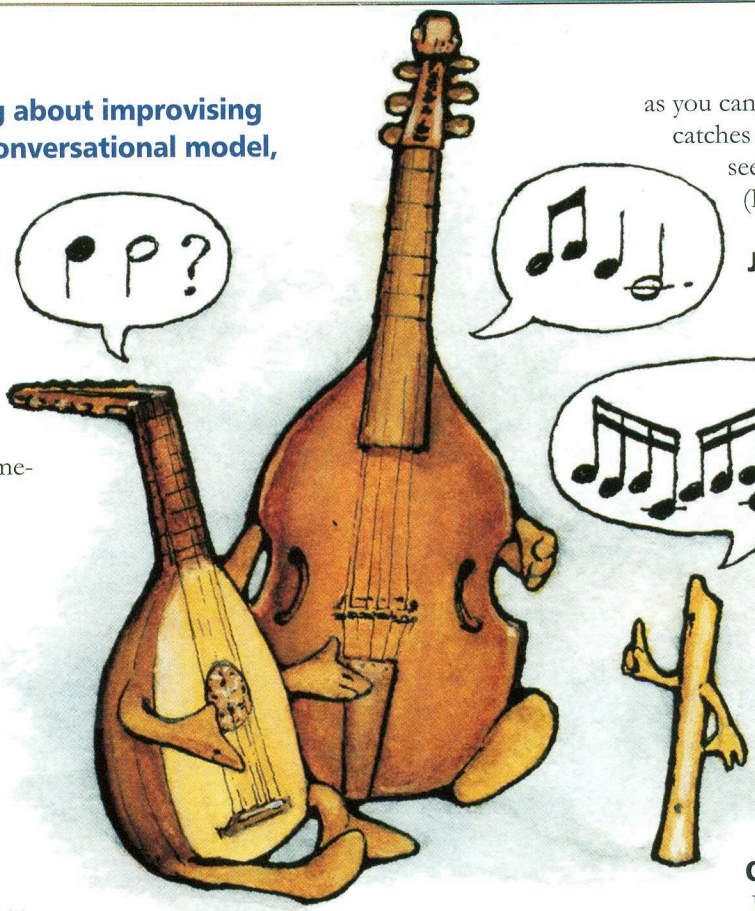

the way the guidelines are filled in gives the music its character. Three kinds of guidelines need to be set:

Starting guidelines: What are the opening parameters of a piece, its scoring, genre, style, tempo?

Generative guidelines: What's the creative kernel; what combination of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic elements drives the piece?

Continuing guidelines: How is that creative idea developed? How does the piece take shape?

Start + Generative Idea + Manner of Continuation = Musical experience.

In composed, common practice music, the composer sets the guidelines and fills them in. In early music, the composer sets the guidelines, and the performer helps fill them in. In improvisation, the performer does it all.

Note that we haven't been trained for either creating guidelines or filling them in. Some improv teachers assume that what we lack is a sense of what to say; they have us compose and memorize musical figures and phrases. But if we knew how to set and then work the guidelines, they would establish a context that would guide us to an idea of what to say. That's why this approach is called contextual improvisation.

And how do we learn and practice these new skills? I suggest we play some theater games.

Theater games

Theater games are simple and fun (they're games, after all), and they reinforce the first three items of our safety net: comfort with the process, trust in our collaborators, and appreciation of our mistakes. Their simplicity makes them the perfect vehicles to introduce a host of new skills classical musicians don't usually get taught, for example, how to

Play – the antidote to performance anxiety;

Give up control – difficult, and fundamental;

Trust – your collaborators actively support you, no grandstanding;

Be interdependent – remain in contact as you improvise;

Be spontaneous – savor the unexpected;

Be responsive – pay attention to your collaborators and say "Yes!" with your response;

Stay in the moment – keep concentration;

Listen and remember – important if there's no text to remind you.

Here are a few, fairly silly circle games translated into music. (For our purposes, silly is good.)

Duck, duck, galliard

The leader stands in the center of the circle with musicians surrounding him. He pivots slowly to his right, looking straight ahead. When he's not looking you play as many notes as you can as fast as you can, stopping just before he catches you in his line of sight. If he sees you playing, you're out. (Playing, being spontaneous.)

Joy juice

The conductor chooses a tune that everyone knows, like Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. At first, he goes around the circle pointing to each musician in turn, and each person plays one note of the piece, in rhythm. After a while the conductor chooses people out of circle order. (Staying in the moment.)

Oh yeah?

People in the circle choose partners. The first person plays a four-beat phrase that ends in a semi-cadence; the second repeats the phrase and ends with a final cadence. (Listening and remembering.)

Oops

Going around the circle, each person plays a successive two-bar phrase of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," purposely inserting one wrong note somewhere in the phrase, and then goes on, remaining in rhythm, with the other notes being right. A variant: each person plays her phrase in a different key. When the tune starts anew, the tempo should increase a notch. (Making mistakes.)

Very basic, but harder than they seem. When it comes to the other two items in the safety net – experience working the guidelines and practice filling them in, using re-purposed tools and new skills – we can create more complex games to practice improvising within different kinds of guidelines. For example:

Transforming the kernel: three-beat motif

Within a 4/4 bar, the first player creates a motif with a distinctive rhythm and melody (three beats and a quarter

rest); successive players, according to a sign from the conductor, either 1) copy it exactly on another pitch, 2) change the rhythm and keep the original pitches, or 3) change pitches, keep rhythm.

Let's see how this approach comes into play with two sample improvisations. If we improvise within a particular era (Medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque) and genre (Ortiz-style variations over a repeating chord pattern or Van Eyck-style divisions over a tune, for example), our starting guidelines will have been pre-selected. We can concentrate on guidelines two and three: choosing some generative ideas and figuring out how to use them to develop the piece.

Troubadour song

For example, if I were improvising an unmeasured introduction to a troubadour song in D Dorian, the starting guidelines tell me the mode, tune, and perhaps my introduction's approximate length. I would decide whether to use any of the troubadour melody in the intro and how to bring out the Dorian character of the mode, particularly the raised sixth and lowered seventh degrees.

The skills I would be practicing include being able to play some phrases in D Dorian and remain in the mode, keeping the tune in my head as I play so I'll know where I am when I want to access tune fragments, listening to the shape of my improvisation as I create it, and knowing when it's time to transition to the vocal entry.

A *folia* pattern

If I'm playing variations over a G Dorian *folia* pattern in 3/4, the starting guidelines are the 16-bar length of the ground and the mode; I would decide how many variations to play and how to structure and contrast the different variations and would make sure I was prepared for the harmonic pattern's quick transition to the B♭ major and return to G minor.

In this case, I'd be practicing the following: being able to choose a melodic/rhythmic motif for each variation, developing that motif as a point of imitation throughout the sequence of the chord pattern, keeping the consonant notes on the strong beats, staying in rhythm, and sounding graceful.

The challenge here isn't just to understand what skills are needed; it's to employ them spontaneously, in real time. You're not just practicing the notes, you're learning how to transform anxiety into exhilaration. Duplicating performance conditions can help, for example, recording a chord pattern on Garage Band and practicing it in different keys and tempi.

To be able to think this way, we need to repurpose two of our basic tools, changing them from receptive to active mode. One is our ear, long employed for listening for ensemble, intonation, and tone, but now also responsible for remembering what's just been played to use as a jumping off point. The other tool is our understanding of music theory – most of us have a descriptive knowledge of theory (this happened and then that happened), but we need a functional, interactive one, grounded in the history of style.

We also need to develop the new skills specific to each kind of improv. Using the theater game approach, we break down each genre into the smallest component tasks and make up games to learn the new skills required, separately and then in combination. Games for the troubadour song would teach shaping, building, and balancing non-metric phrases. Games for the *folia* pattern would have us creating motifs on the spot, choosing a way to develop them as we go, playing them with accompaniment, and experimenting with continuation and contrast.

But we still haven't really talked about how to decide what notes to play. Perhaps, "any note you want," is too vague an answer, but the truth is that the possibilities are as vast and varied as the Sunday morning dim sum menu at Mark's Duck House.

Imagine participating in this mirror exercise. Two people sit facing each other. When the leader claps once, Person A leads and Person B copies everything that A does, being her mirror image. When the leader claps twice, Person A continues to lead and Person B does the *opposite* of whatever Person A is doing.

Hmm. Well, if Person A slowly lifts her right arm at her side, thumb up, there could be a slew of opposites. B could:

Change hand shape, still lifting slowly, put her right palm up or make a fist;

Change quality of movement, lift her right arm jerkily or angrily;

Change speed, lift her right arm faster but smoothly;

Change plane, lift her right arm in front of her or in an arc;

Change side, lift her left arm slowly;

Change amount of movement, lift both arms slowly;

Change direction, make either arm drop;

Change action, do something completely different

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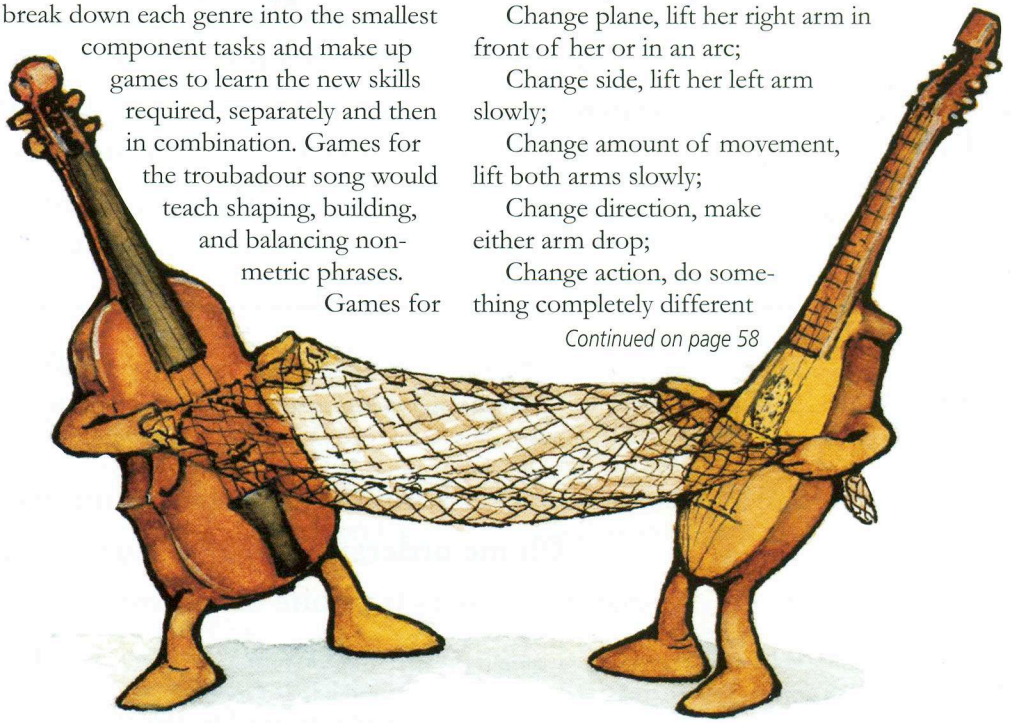
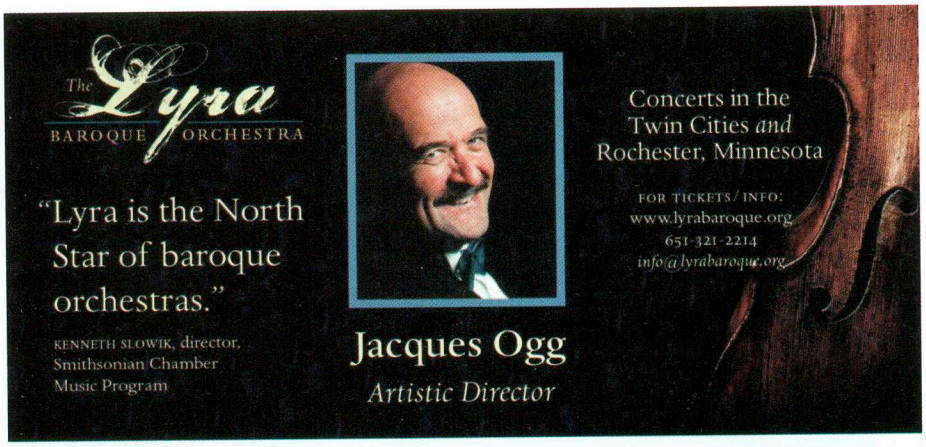


The guidelines give a context; within that context, anything that relates to it, works. How's that for a safety net?



Improvisation

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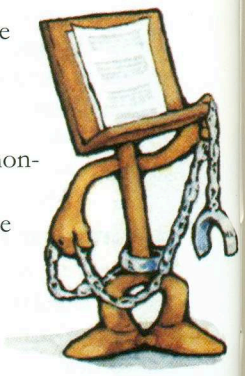
like shake her head.



There are dozens more possible opposites; all develop the initial motif, all are valid. Interpreted musically, the results demonstrate why the notes you play are not the issue. The guidelines give a context; within that context anything that relates to it, works. How's that for a safety net?

Interfaces

Even though the possibilities are vast, they may be hard to snatch out of thin air. You don't necessarily want to spout notes without having them mean something, without creating an emotional impact. As a bridge, one improv practice is to choose an interface that provides a kind of automatic context. You choose the interface according to the kind of improv you'll be doing. Here are some interfaces you can use to organize your ideas and generate music.

Language: Anything to do with the sentence. Rhetoric, scansion, phrases, balance, intonation, dip, question, assertion. Good for divisions over a ground, Simpson, Ortiz.

Drama: Anything to do with a story. Mood, situation, scene, plot, story, character. Good for Ortiz-like improvs over one line of a madrigal such as "Douce Mémoire," viola bastarda variations, Corelli.

Visual: Anything to do with what you see. Patterns, shapes, designs, colors. Good for free improvs over modes.

Physical: Anything to do with movement, kinetic experience. Moving any body part, dancing, jumping, running, hopping, in regular meters or irregular lunges, groove, flow, gesture. Good for quick divisions like Van Eyck.

Aural: What you hear. Natural sounds, traffic, garbage trucks, wind, anything creating rhythm, pitch, and/or harmony. Good for unaccompanied preludes, Hotteterre, Sainte-Colombe.

Combining interfaces

Imagine you're participating in a two-minute, two-person scene. You're an angry father and the other person is your 17-year-old daughter, who has brought the car back two hours after curfew. If asked to improvise a confrontation, you'll probably have some idea of what to say, based on context: anger met by unconvincing explanations; pleading met by resistance; threats met by defiance. The next step: replay the same scene using verbal gibberish. You'll find that even if the words aren't there, your intentions are clear. The final step: replay the scene using instruments. Isn't the same thing true as with gibberish? Within the emotional context of the scene, the intention is clear.

It's time to stop writing; after this brief introduction, contextual improvisation can speak for itself. This article is meant to provide a simple foundation for a complicated process; please excuse any intellectual excursions that wander too far in either direction. I'll leave you with one final thought, a historical precedent for distinguishing between composed and improvised music.

In the year 1600, 60-year-old Giovanni Maria Artusi attacked the "crudities" and "license" shown in the compositions of 33-year-old Claudio Monteverdi. Many reasons have been suggested for Artusi's polemic, but James Bates (in "Monteverdi, The Viola Bastarda Player," in *The Italian Viola da Gamba, Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Viola da Gamba*, 2002) speaks to our topic when he reminds us that early in his career, Monteverdi was better known as a viola bastarda virtuoso than as a composer. Artusi was implying that Monteverdi's indulgence in spontaneous displays of viola bastarda improvisation led to a poor grasp of the rules of composition, resulting in bad voice leading and unprepared dissonances, vices that Monteverdi attempted to rationalize by labeling them a *seconda prattica*.

Whether or not Artusi's critique was justified, why was his argument given any credence at all? Because improvisation and composition were seen as two distinct practices, and just as he says that improvisation doesn't prepare you to be a composer, the reverse is true; writing

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or interpreting composed music does not prepare you to improvise. And if this article has persuaded you of that, perhaps you'll think twice about swatting flies with a Frisbee.

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