

Improvising Music In The Primary Classroom

What is improvising?

- Making music up ‘the spot.’
- Most improvising has guidelines to make it easier for a group of people to do together. (Completely ‘free’ improvising - do anything you want - might not work in the classroom!)

Example: All play some very soft sounds together, using short repeated notes and then get gradually louder.

What were the guidelines here and what aspects were the improvisation?
 What difference would it make if someone conducted / led this improvisation?
 How could you make it even more ‘structured’?

- Improvising is a kind of composing.
- When improvised ideas become ‘fixed’ they can turn into a more formal composition.
- In a formal composition there can still be an element of improvisation: for example in jazz where melodies are improvised over a fixed set of chords.

Why is improvising a good method for classroom music?

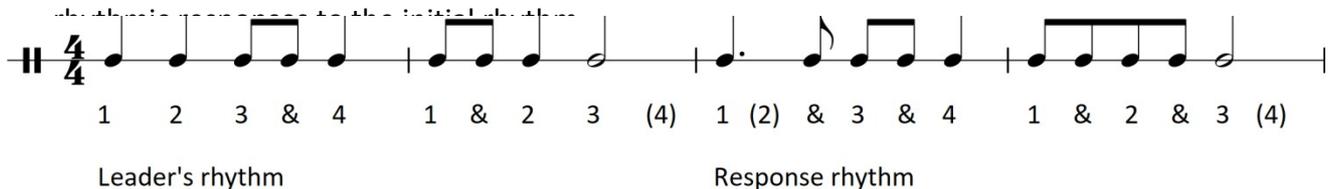
- Anyone can do it: your children don’t need prior skill or knowledge, so long as they can learn to listen well.
- This also means it works well in a mixed ability context.
- Over time you can develop ‘fixed’ compositions using improvisation as a starting point.
- Improvisation encourages creativity and cooperation as well as listening / concentration skills.

How do I start improvising in the classroom?

- Begin with rhythm, for example:



- Start teacher-led (all doing ‘copy back’) then move to pupil-led, and then to pupils creating different



This question & answer / call & response method creates structure and balance.

- Top tip! Set a steady pulse ('the beat') as the foundation of the class rhythm-making. Without this it is harder to create musical order and pattern from the rhythms.
- Count while creating rhythms: this teaches children about metre i.e. beats in the bars and strong / weak beats.

What's the next step?

- Doing rhythms only will eventually become too repetitive, especially for older children (Year 2 and above), so you'll need to introduce other musical elements, especially pitch and texture.

Why is the pentatonic scale a good way to develop pitched music in the classroom?

- The pentatonic (5 note) scale is common in musical cultures around the world.
- You'll probably be most familiar with it though British folk music and blues from the USA (which later evolved into rock /pop music). For example:

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is in 3/4 time and contains the notes D, E, D, G, G, A, B, A, D, B, A, B, E, E, D. The second staff is in 4/4 time and contains the notes E, G, A, E, G, C, D, E, D, C.

- You should find children will quickly learn to sing and play pentatonic melodies.

Why is the pentatonic scale especially useful in the classroom?

- By removing 2 notes from tuned percussion, the 4th and 7th steps of the scale (e.g. F and B, which makes the C major / A minor pentatonic), children can 'see' and understand this simple scale:
C D E G A
- We can hear the 5 pentatonic notes blending well with each other. In other words it's almost impossible to play a 'wrong' note when improvising and layering with pentatonic scales: they all fit together.

What's the best way to get the class to improvise / compose their own melodies?

- Create a steady pulse for them to play along to.
- Allow them to play quite freely using the pentatonic notes.
- Explain and demonstrate some simple 'rules' of melody making:
 - a) Use a mixture of steps and jumps
 - b) Use some repeated notes
 - c) Use a mixture of long and short notes. For example:

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with the following notes: A C D E, D D D C E, A C D E, D D D E A.

