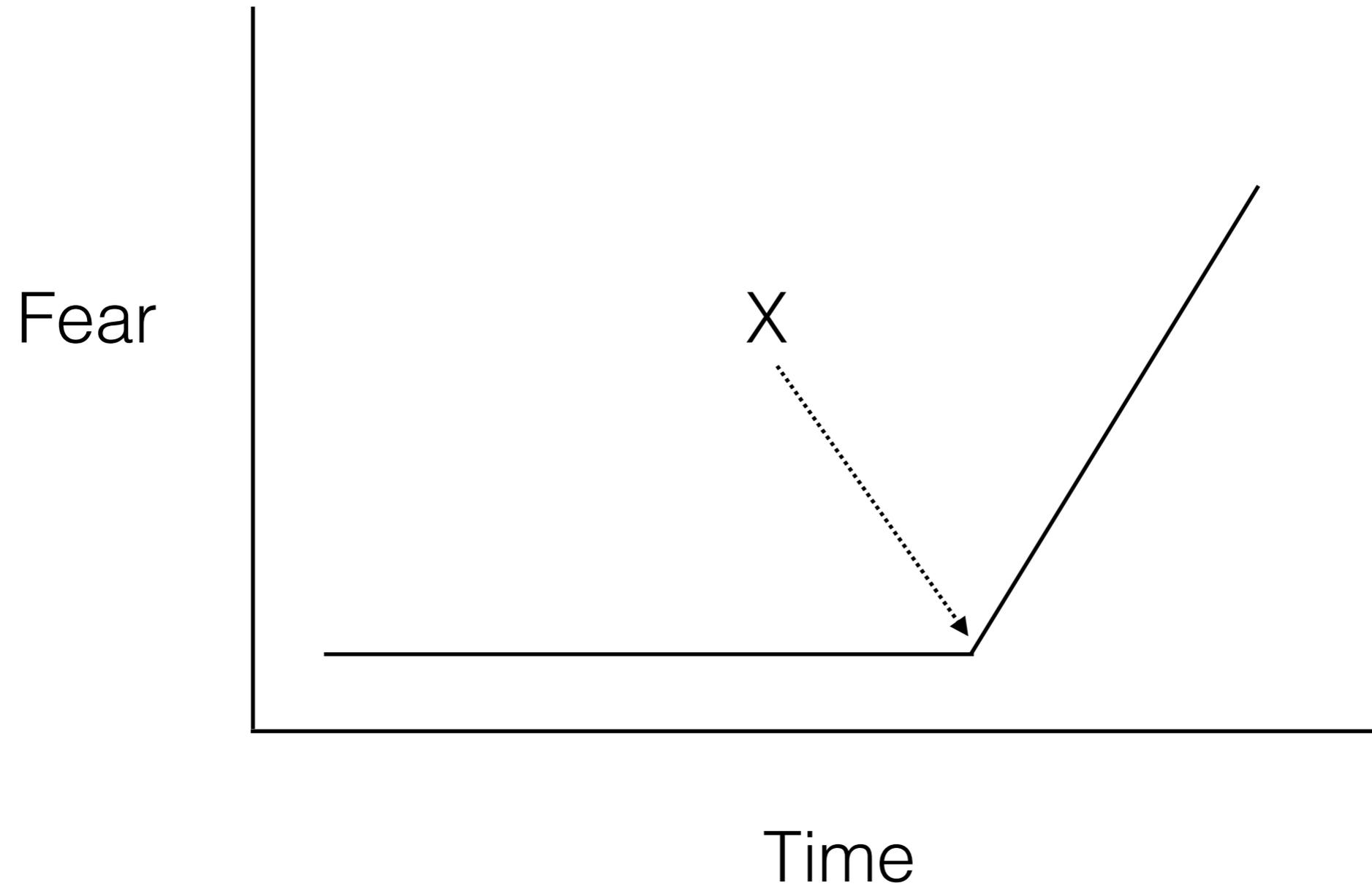


Nurturing Improvisation in your ensemble - Overcome fear and develop skills

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X = being asked to improvise



Common assumption:

"I don't know enough"

"I am going to look bad"

"I don't know what to do"

To be creative I need to know "stuff".

**Myth: Creativity is primarily
a knowledge/skill challenge.**

To be creative first of all
students need to feel safe.

**Creativity is initially primarily
an emotional challenge.**

Students need to feel safe **and**
then need to be provided with the **right kind of knowledge.**

NB The **wrong kind of knowledge** provided by educators is often analytical skills for assessing the end product with no information about the process. This is incorrectly seen as helping people to create their own end products. It doesn't and often it helps them to over-analyse or judge their own ideas too soon in a way that creates fear and blocks the creative process. So it can be anti-creative. Providing a list of ingredients (chords and scales) without any information how to use them or manage using them isn't that helpful either.

**Students need process-oriented knowledge and
process management strategies.**

Brain Overload in Public

Many music and creativity challenges - and especially improvisation - overload the conscious brain processing capacity and so make students feel overwhelmed and out of control of what they are doing.

They tend to feel - “*this is hard*”, “*I can’t do it*”.

This understandably doesn't feel good, and when an audience is added (even if that is just the ensemble), it can lead to the expectation of embarrassment or looking foolish or worse.

We need to support students to develop skills and strategies to make the amount of real-time processing they have to do manageable. Concepts and ideas they are using need to be manageable - the **right kind of knowledge** provides this.

Yelling “*Don’t be afraid*” at students*, or giving them information that will inevitably overload their real-time processing capacity, doesn’t tend to work for most students.

* an approach we have witnessed.....

A culture that nurtures improvisation

Feel safe - develop skills

- Use warm ups without instruments
- Make it fun & safe
- Normalise individual contributions in a group setting
- Making choices - listening - being in the moment
- Give students options: body percussion vs voice, pre-composed rhythms.
- Use call & response, nb each person do it 2x (improvise then remember)
- Use layout & space to change energy eg circle
- Ask them to be precise in terms of the length of their ideas (if you ask for a one bar long call insist on a one bar call).

Some ideas:

Circle Games

- Send a sound round the Circle - Beep (same direction) Clap (change direction)
- **Walking inside the circle** (group says Yes or No or Beep when walker's foot hits the ground) walker chooses next person

My Name's Tom

- My Name's Tom - with 4/4 groove from drum, metronome, or tapping on legs.
- Call and response both 1 bar long
- Format: Always start with:
(Call) my name's tom (Response) YOUR NAME'S TOM.

Then:

- Variations: **Inner Animal**, (I am a dog, YOU ARE A DOG, woof woof woof, WOOF, WOOF, WOOF)
- **Shapes** (I say the shapes, YOU SAY THE SHAPES; square, circle ,circle,shh;SQUARE, CIRCLE ,CIRCLE,SHH)
- *Level 1 call and response both spoken.*
- *Level 2 call spoken response clapped*

- **Scat*** (I'm a jazz singer YOU'RE A JAZZ SINGER, doobey, doo, be-bop skiddly; DOOBEY, DOO, BE-BOP, SKIDDLY)
- NB When doing Call & Response - sometimes ask each person do the improv part twice: 1st x improv, 2nd x remember and repeat idea). Being able to remember and repeat ideas is important.

Jazz vs Straight Quavers

- **Straight quavers:** Repeat saying "1,2" (*evenly /over and over*) with a click with "1" on the click. Switch to **Jazz quavers:** Repeat saying "1,2,3" (*evenly/over and over*) with "1" on the click. The "1"s are the on beats. The "2"s are off beat in straight quavers, and "3"s are the off beats in jazz quavers.
- **On/Off Beats with Jazz & Straight Quavers** (clap on 1 (on) or 2 (off) with straight quavers, or 1(on) or 3(off) with jazz quavers). Switch between clapping/scatting just on and just off, clapping/scatting both on and off, and clapping neither.

- * There are lots of words one can use for scat. The main thing is DON'T enunciate each syllable separately and have a 'jazz' rhythmic feel.

Phrase Building Skills

Human Piano

**Split ensemble into 3 groups with gap between.
Have flipchart facing conductor**

Explain: “Each group is a key on the piano.
You play by pointing with one hand.”

Set sounds: (Group 1): “Apple” (Group 2): “Banana” (Group 3): “Carrot”

Establish:

Idea Length: (“play an idea that is 2/3/4 notes long and then stop”)

Repetition: (“play a 4 note idea then do it again and then do it again”) *write AAA on a flipchart*

Contrast: (“play a 4 note idea then do it again and then do it again then do a different 4 note idea”) *write AAAB on a flipchart*

Return: (“play a 4 note idea then do it again then do a different 4 note idea and then do the first idea again”) *write AABA on a flipchart*

Each time a new conductor gets up check they understand each concept.

Big idea:

People think to improvise effectively they need to use complicated ideas. BUT if the ideas are too complicated they are harder to remember, therefore using ideas of form (consistent idea length, repetition, contrast, return, variation, resolution) becomes unmanageable as your brain overloads.

Students can learn using Human Piano that if they **keep the ideas simple** they can create a lot of complexity by using ideas of form WHILE staying in control of what they are doing AND hearing the results which are clear and effective. Applying ideas of form to simple manageable ideas produces results that sound much better than out of control use of more complicated ideas, or endless strings of notes with no form.

Development Ideas:

Change sounds: (Group 1): “Diddley-Bop” (Group 2): “Flim Flam” (Group 3): “Schwee”

Use a backing groove (cd/drummer):

Ask students to play the human piano in time with a beat

Add in a rest: Pointing to the floor can be a rest.

Keep Going: If you successfully improvise an AABA form do another one straight away with different A and B ideas.

More Form Ideas:

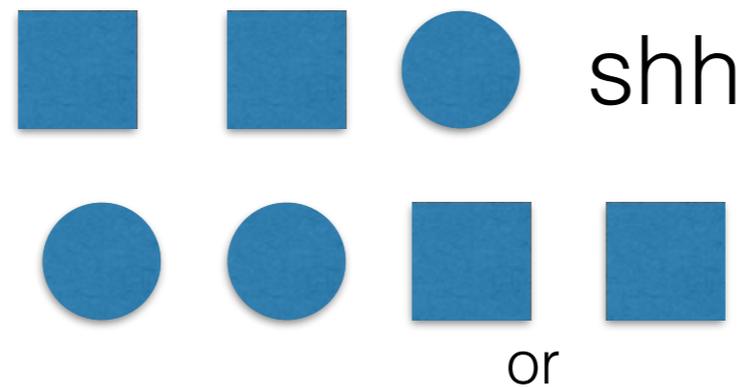
Variation: “same but different” so repeat an idea but change just one of the notes” eg A = apple apple apple banana then A_v = apple apple carrot banana *write AA_v on a flipchart*

Resolution: at the end of a phrase make the last note of the 4 note idea a rest to create the feeling of ending *write $AABA_R$ on a flipchart*
eg if A = apple apple apple banana A_R = apple apple apple

Move onto the Instrument

Do call and response on 1 note.

You can provide a couple of pre-composed 1 bar options.



make up your own 1 bar idea
????

Then same with 2 notes.

Use ideas of form:

Improvise an AAAB pattern on 1 or 2 notes with call & response with the ensemble.

	Call				Response			
A				shh				shh
A				shh				shh
A				shh				shh
B								

Then try AABA.

Notes in a circle

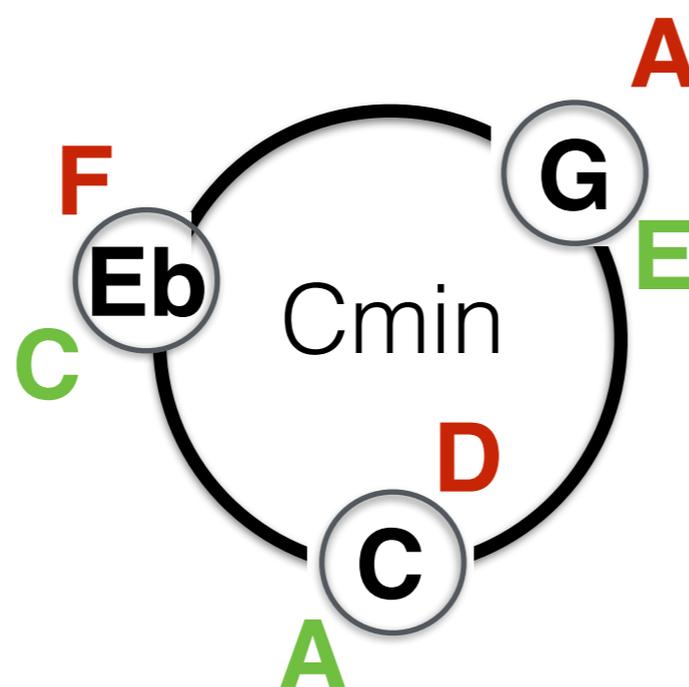
Place notes from a triad, chord, pentatonic, or scale in a circle with the root always at the 6 o'clock position.

Write concert, Eb, and Bb notes in different colours.

In scales write chord tones (root, third, fifth, seventh) bigger than passing notes.

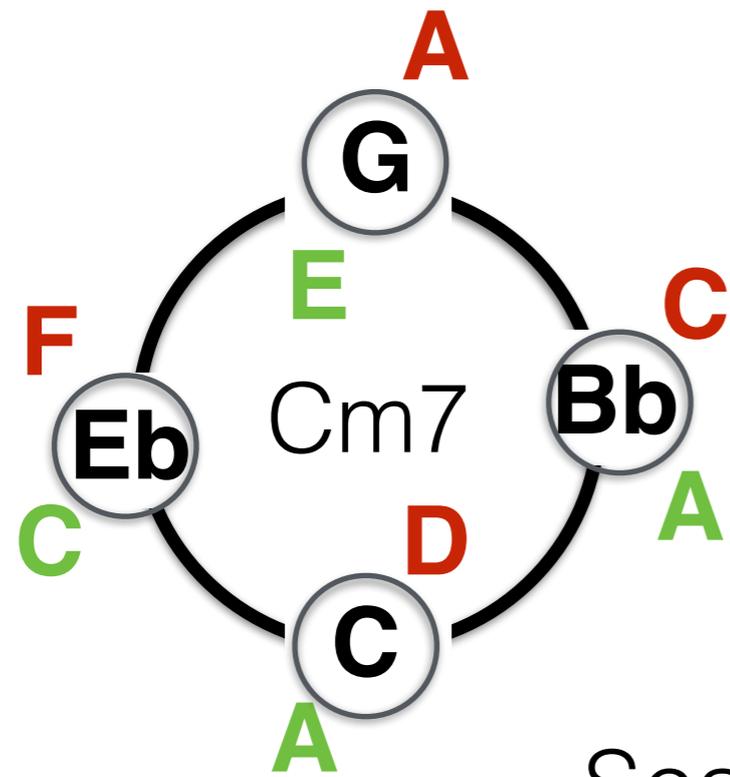
One student improvises by pointing/touching on the flipchart, rest of ensemble plays the notes as conducted. Play note as long as flipchart is touched.
NB You can repeat the same note and go up the octave by keeping on going clockwise.

A Triad in a circle:

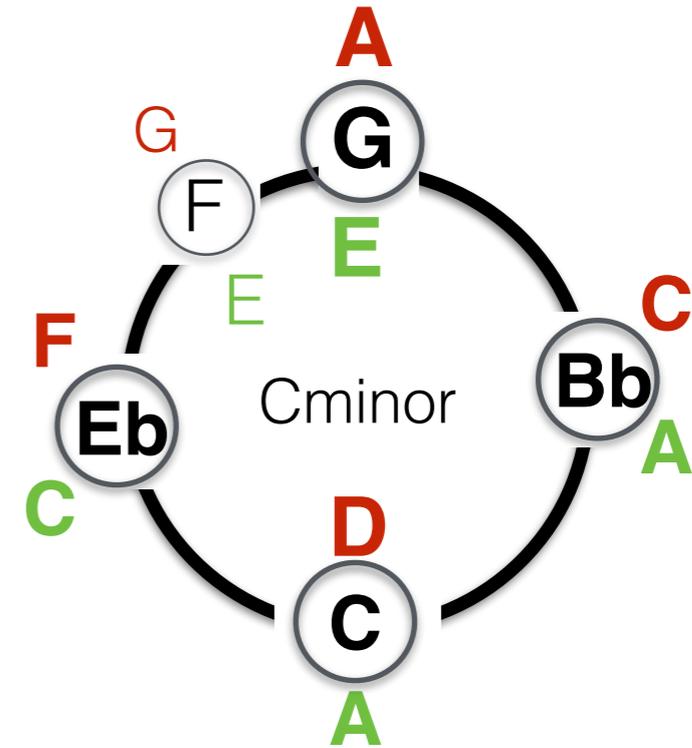


- Use ideas of form:**
- 1) Play an idea 4 notes long by pointing.
 - 2) Play AAA
 - 3) Play AAAB
 - 4) Play AABA
 - 5) Play a series of AABA phrases
 - 6) Vary your idea/phrase length
 - 7) Play AA_vBA_R with A_R ending on the root.
 - 8) Conductor play what they have conducted on their instrument

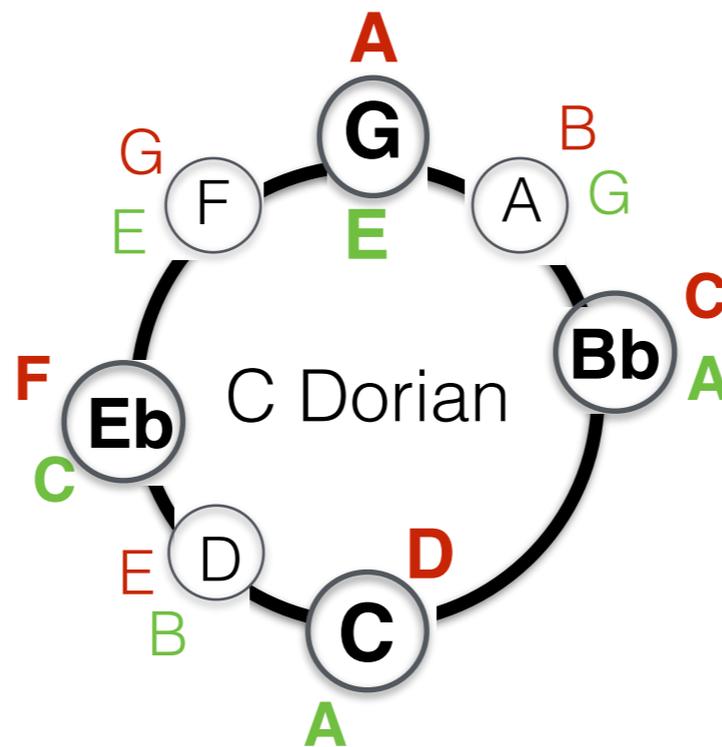
Chord in a circle



Pentatonic in a circle



Scale/Mode in a circle



For scales/modes write chord tones (root, third, fifth, seventh) bigger than passing notes.

Imagine they are stepping stones. Chord tones have enough space for 2 feet, so you can stop there. Passing notes have space for only one foot so you step on them on the way to a chord tone.

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