

National Standard #3: Improvising Melodies, Variations, and Accompaniments

Grades K-4

Achievement Standard:

- Students improvise “answers” in the same style to given rhythmic and melodic phrases
- Students improvise simple rhythmic and melodic ostinato accompaniments
- Students improvise simple rhythmic variations and simple melodic embellishments on familiar melodies
- Students improvise short songs and instrumental pieces, using a variety of sound sources, including traditional sounds, nontraditional sounds available in the classroom, body sounds, and sounds produced by electronic means

Grades 5-8

Achievement Standard:

- Students improvise simple harmonic accompaniments
- Students improvise melodic embellishments and simple rhythmic and melodic variations on given pentatonic melodies and melodies in major keys
- Students improvise short melodies, unaccompanied and over given rhythmic accompaniments, each in a consistent style,

Elementary students in the music classroom are inherently free of the inhibitions and timidity for the creative process that come with age. These early years are a critical time to foster students’ creative development, harnessing their fresh perspective before social and emotional roadblocks complicate this skill development. There are intrinsic and extrinsic values for teaching improvisation skills to our students:

- Successful research and development has been the backbone of our economy in the United States. Brain research shows that if we can build the cranial super highways (dendrites) early in our cognitive development, pathways to these skills are liable to be much stronger (more creative) in adulthood. Therefore, if we can teach skills for creativity at an early age, those students should have much more creative potential as adults, thus creating the new inventions for our future.
- Part of what we do as elementary music teachers is guide students to express themselves in a healthy way. As in learning to play an instrument, improvisation is a skill that is developed through practice, piecing together the building blocks as skills develop. We can break down these skills to fundamentals that students can understand and perform well.

Whether it is Orff, recorder, guitar, or voice, the basic fundamentals and building blocks are the same.

Process

- Have the class learn the accompaniment pattern provided for the recorder. This pattern will be used to create the accompaniment for individual improvised solos providing the harmonic structure and beat reference.
- Rhythmic variation: Have students practice playing the accompaniment while improvising the rhythm.
- Neighbor notes: Have students practice playing the accompaniment while changing the notes to include those in-between what is printed. For example, in measure one, have the students play G, A, B with the improvised rhythm instead of just the G & B that is printed.
- Call & response: Give the students ideas and examples by playing around the accompaniment with call and response. i.e. the teacher plays a variation of a measure, and the students copy what the teacher played.
- Melodic variation: Have students play the accompaniment with rhythm as written, but altering the melody. They could start by playing passing tones on either side of the written melody.
- Melodic parameters: Start by limiting the notes which the students use to improvise. Keeping it simple to create instant success, in each measure, identify the notes that are part of the harmonic structure as well as the notes that could be used as passing tones.
- Individual performance: Divide the class into smaller groups whereby one person in each group improvises at a time while the rest of the group provides the accompaniment. Encourage the students to be sensitive to dynamics so the soloist is playing louder than the accompaniment, and the accompaniment is playing under the soloist.
- Record soloists for their portfolios: The recording process can add focus and effort to the performance. These recordings can also be used in the future as a benchmark to help other students.

Make sure students are playing only notes and fingerings they have learned. Students want to play arbitrary fingers when trying to copy what they hear the teacher playing.

Primary Students

- Each student will improvise and “answer” to the call given by a teacher using hand percussion, body percussion or Sol Mi tone bells.
- Using familiar three note songs (such as *Hot Cross Buns* or *Merrily We Roll Along*) each student will create their own variation or embellishment of the given melody.