

Improvisation on the Fiddle

by Sean Kenan

Sounds at Rest and sounds in Motion

A simple way of describing musical improvisation is sounds at rest and sounds in motion. Notes that define the Key establish the musical parameters and these are often starting or finishing notes but also can be longer, held notes in a piece of music. If the musician has a good knowledge of the style played, the notes connecting the home or Key notes can be arranged in a free way while keeping the main musical theme alive in this expression. Even notes that are discordant can provide tension to the improvisation. Too many wild or off Key notes however will upset the other players and listeners.

Improvisational Devices

- Rhythmic Variation: Syncopation (off beat accented playing) Cross timing (eg. 6/8 in 4/4 and 4/4 in 6/8 timing)
- Scales: Substituting Minor for Major and vice-versa)
- Phrasing: Notes arranged in different groupings than the main theme. One example would be interpreting the melody in the way a singer would use their breath.
- Hover around Key or home note to bring out chord. This brings listener back to the reference point of the piece.
- Develop a story in musical form: Nice beginning, drama in the middle and a happy ending.
- Motif: Echoes of the main motif in the improvisation are reminders of the source of the improvisation which is the main melody.
- Call and Response (also called Question and Answer): A short phrase can be repeated in different octaves or with slight variation.
- Random Notion: No structure and wild abandon (use with discretion)
- Search for missing or hidden note. In Ireland this is called "The Lonesome Note" This is

searching for the one note that will change or lead to the essence of the tune, a common goal in County Clare Ireland.

- Ornamentation: Substituting groups of melody notes with ornaments like rolls, crans slides and triplets.

Folk music traditions around the world all incorporate improvisation to varying degrees. Improvisation can be described as spontaneous artistic expression. Classical music on the other hand has very little improvisation although the Baroque period allowed for soloists to go off on improvised tangents in what were called Cadenzas. These occurred in specific sections of orchestrated pieces. Jazz is an example of a highly improvised musical form. Jazz has its beginnings and style founded in African American folk music. Depending on the fiddle tradition, improvisation can take either a minor or major role depending on the style. Sharing the musical space with other musicians is considered polite in most cultures. Musicians in the group take turns to solo then fall back to rhythm chordal playing referred to in some styles as Back Up. Music making with others becomes difficult when the space is not shared. Solo playing in folk traditions and Jazz allows for equal time for each member's solo. A good way to be left out of future musical gatherings is to play far longer solos than others in the group.

Bluegrass: Most tunes in this style involve all musicians taking a turn at soloing while others do back up. Sometimes the solo can be pre-arranged but improvised breaks are usually encouraged.

Scottish: Percussive back up accompaniment called "chopping" has become part of this tradition especially among contemporary Scottish fiddle ensembles and duos. The chopping keeps the beat while a solo is played. Straying too far from the melody is not encouraged.

Irish: Most players at Irish sessions stick to the melody but variations in the melody are tolerated provided they don't put off other players. Chopping technique and straying too far from the melody are frowned upon at most Irish sessions.

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