

The Original Dilemma

You've seen it before. The young improviser stands up in a jazz band concert and plays a decent solo, except for one thing: you have a hard time believing the student actually improvised it. And he or she didn't – the teacher wrote it out beforehand and the student memorized it. So is there anything wrong with that? Isn't that better than an aimlessly wandering solo?

The Safety Net

Here's my take on this dilemma: rote learning is better than aimless wandering, but not by much. With a pre-planned solo, which is not really improvisation, the hope is that the student will somehow get the idea of how to improvise and come up with an original solo next time – or eventually. And most of the time, with someone doing the pre-thinking but not thinking in real-time), it ends up being eventually. Why take risks when you could play something foolproof? Ah, the convenience and the shackles of rote learning ...

Besides the lack of vision in this approach, there's also the issue of learning not to interact with the rhythm section. With a pre-planned solo, the student gets used to ignoring the rest of the music, because it's not going to affect the note choice anyway.

The Wanderers

But wandering clueless in a solo is certainly not any better; it's usually worse. I've seen this *carte blanche* approach too many times in student concerts. Students play solos with little regard to chord changes, time, development, or much else. OK, it does take effort and courage to perform in public – but what the audience hears gives a poor example of improvisation. Even worse, enthusiastic and well-meaning supporters in the audience whoop it up and cheer loudly for the soloist, which distorts the whole jazz experience. Students learn early that they'll get more cheers if they include the three elements of junk-food playing: higher, faster, and louder. I've seen it a million times, and unfortunately teachers often do little to reverse this trend – after all, what's wrong with getting applause?

The Answer

The solution to this problem is easier than most people would think. Teachers: don't send a student up to solo with a written passage, and don't send a student up to wander in the dark (a good way to get stage fright). Instead, prepare them with flexible scales and SHAPE, then let them enjoy creating. The warm-up time most bands spend on rote patterns and licks around the circle of fourths could instead be spent on flexible scales that have tangible payoffs in performance situations. And virtual practice can expand that even further. Stage fright can evaporate quickly when students embrace the vision of flexible scales.

The Challenge

Just to make things more difficult, most bands perform tunes that have challenging chord progressions. This drives students to one extreme or another – rote memorization or aimless wandering. The healthy approach of flexible scales and vision is more demanding when there are tough chords to negotiate.

That's where simplification comes in – focusing on key centers, playing simpler but solid rhythms, learning melodic connection, etc. All of these are discussed in *The Art of Improvisation*. Still, the burden is on the teacher to select music that won't leave student soloists in the dust and undo whatever progress they're making towards genuine, enjoyable improvisation.