

# Improvisation for Melody Instruments

Teleri the Well-Prepared

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A Note: “Tonic” is the “do” in “do re mi fa so la ti do.”

## Outline

- I. Methods of playing
- II. The Head Game
- III. Free play and rhythms
- IV. Limitations to shape and guide melodies
- V. Melody structures
- VI. Instant Authenticity

## I. Methods of Playing

These are my personal experiences, not any sort of authoritative list.

“Ears” and “Head and Ears”: “Hearing” in your head the next few notes you want to hit; optionally using “head knowledge” of music theory or song structures to shape your improv. This is what I mostly do and what the bulk of this class is about.

“Fingers”: Moving fingers/hands/lips in kinesthetically pleasing patterns (“feels good”). If each finger/hand/lip position corresponds to a note, a note pattern will emerge.

“Eyes” and “Head and Ears”: Watching yourself play and seeing which string/hole/key you want to go to next; optionally using “head knowledge” of music theory or song structures to shape your improv.

You may find one or more of these techniques more natural than others. Feel free to see what works for you.

## II. The Head Game

Improvisation is not a super-advanced technique that only highly-skilled instrumentalists can master. I got started with improv, in fact, because I’m a lousy musician by the usual standards.

It can help to have an understanding of musical theory and structure, either from a book or from experience in playing written songs, so it is perhaps best thought of as an advanced beginner or intermediate skill. However, it would not surprise me to find a fearless novice doing well with it.

Like most things with performing, believing that you can do it is half the road to doing it.

### Getting Over the Fear of "Wrong Notes"

Repeat after me: There are no wrong notes. It's improvisation. You're making it up as you go. If there are no notes pre-determined at all, how can any be "right" or "wrong?"

You may have an idea of what you want to play in mind, and you may miss it. That's fine. Just move on. If you like, play it a few more times to reinforce the tension and then resolve it by going to the note you meant to hit.

### Allow Your Audience to Love You

The SCA audience is hungry for music, especially for "background music" that adds to the ambiance of an event without demanding their full attention. They are grateful to you for bringing music into their encampment or event, even if no one thanks you until you are done.

They do not know what you are playing, and if it is "supposed" to be that way or not. They will love the music and thank you for playing. Accept the compliments with grace. "Thank you, I'm glad you enjoyed it" is totally honest, even if you think your playing was terrible.

Once you can accept that fact that no, really, people do like your music, you will have much more confidence.

### Relax and Let the Instrument Work

If you have a hard time placing confidence in yourself, put confidence in your instrument. If you can pull five clear notes from it, you can make good music. You don't have to play very fast or with lots of ornaments. Slow bits sound reflective or sad; medium-paced bits are pleasant sounds. Go at whatever speed you are comfortable and trust the voice of your instrument to please the audience.

**Exercise 1:** Pick up your instrument and play some unrehearsed notes. Just do it.

## **III. Free Play and Rhythms**

While there is no such thing as a "wrong note," there is such a thing as a broken meter. Your audience is much more aware of changes in your rhythm than they are of the melody.

The easiest way to handle this is to *go slow*. A melodic sequence with a lot of long, held notes (or rests!) gives you a lot of room to wiggle. A vigorous Irish jig-sounding thing in brisk 6/8 time does not.

**Exercise 2:** Pick up your instrument and play some unrehearsed notes, *slowly and flowingly*. If you like, you can add a few quick notes as ornaments here and there, but consider each one its own stand-alone figure, instead of a rhythmic pattern you have to maintain. End on tonic.

You may find yourself falling into rhythmic patterns (even when you are playing slowly). For example: I often favor a “long, short short long, short short long” pattern (because I can think of where the “short short”s go while I hold the long!) If this happens - and if it bothers you! - consciously select a different rhythmic pattern. For example: a smooth run of 6-8 notes, hold the last one; repeat.

#### **IV. Limitations to Shape and Guide Melodies**

If you enjoy the sounds you get by wandering over your instrument, that is fine! But I like my improvisations to sound more “song-like,” which you can achieve by adding limitations or constraints to shape and guide your music.

##### Limited Range

Many songs fit inside an octave, or an octave plus a third or a fourth (8-12 notes). Some songs, including children’s songs and European folks songs, fit within even narrower ranges than that (5-6 notes). One way to help keep your improv from meandering all over your instrument’s range is to set a smaller range that you will play within. (It is also okay to play notes outside of this range if the spirit moves you to.)

**Exercise 3:** Repeat Exercise 2, but keep your music inside of an octave (or inside of a fifth, if your instrument only spans an octave). End on tonic.

##### Stepwise Motion

If you find it difficult to decide what note to play next, you can limit yourself to stepwise motion. After each note, you can:

- Play that note again
- Play the note one step up
- Play the note one step down
- Rest

And that’s it. Repeat, up, down, or silence. It takes the mental burden of deciding “Oh no, what should I play?” away. (And it doesn’t mean your music will be bad. “Ode to Joy” and “Joy to the World” are composed mostly of stepwise motion.)

**Exercise 4:** Repeat Exercise 3, limiting yourself to stepwise motion. If the spirit moves you to use a larger interval, that’s okay. End on tonic.

**Exercise 5:** Repeat Exercise 4, but using a different rhythmic pattern than the one you’ve been using. End on tonic.

**Exercise 6:** Repeat Exercise 4, but change the limits on your range. If you were playing from a “do” of middle C to high C, play (for instance) from the G below middle C to the G above middle C. End on tonic - C in this case. (Wise guys - we will get to modes later.)

As you get more comfortable with improvisation, you can give yourself more options.

## V. Melody Structures

### Melodic Figures

How many songs do you know that start with the rising figure, “so la DO”? Or end with a falling “re ti DO”? Or “re re, ti ti, do do”? Or... There are many of these little figures; the ones at the end of songs are called “cadences,” and some of them are almost musical cliches. If you learn a few and throw them on to the end of an improv, it sounds like the ending of a composed song.

### Open and Closed Sections

Because of physics, the fifth (the interval from “do” to “so” on the “do re mi fa so la ti do” scale) is hugely important in music. Particularly, “so” itself - a fifth above tonic, or “scale degree 5” - is hugely important.

As you play your improv, you may come to what sound or feel or look like the natural endpoints of phrases. If it were a song, this would be the end of a line. The note may be held.

At the end of the entire piece, we make sure we end on “tonic” to neatly wrap the song up.

But in the middle of the piece, we can end one of these phrases on “so.” This is called an “open” ending. Then, play a bit more, and see if you can end a phrase on “do.” This is a “closed” ending. It does not have to be the closed ending of your whole improv, just a temporary rest point. Then, play some more and end a phrase “open.” Continue until you are ready to finish, and end on tonic.

**Exercise 7:** Using whatever range and rhythms you like, and any intervals you like, play an improvisation with alternating “open” and “closed” endings. End on tonic, using a well-known cadence if you like.

### Repeated Sections

Nothing says “I meant to do that” like playing it again. It also is a familiar pattern in dance tunes, where you dance a figure to the right, then to the left.

This takes some skill, because you have to remember what you just played. If you can’t remember what you just played, file this away as something to try again later.

**Exercise 8:** Play three or four notes; repeat them.

**Exercise 9:** Play three or four notes; repeat them. After the repeat, keep playing three or four new notes. Repeat them.

You can keep expanding the general form of Exercises 8 and 9 to learn to remember more note sequences, and to string them into longer and longer songs.

### Repeated Sections, Open and Closed

When you can play repeated sections easily, try playing them open and closed. End the first play through on “so.” On the repeat, bring it down to “do” instead.

Simply changing the last note might be jarring, so you may need to change the last few notes of your phrase. Instead of a note or two leading up to “so,” you may need a note or two leading down to “do.”

This technique brings together a lot of the skills above, and works best when you can play 4-6 bars and repeat it while varying the ending. That is a lot to do on the fly! This is something to try once you are bored with what you’ve learned in Exercises 1-9, not necessarily something you will do later tonight.

## **VI. Instant Authenticity**

### Modes

We have done all our work today in the major scale. That is “do re mi fa so la ti do,” or the white keys on the keyboard, starting from C.

There’s a minor scale, too. That goes “la ti do re mi fa so la,” or is all the white keys on the keyboard, starting on A.

The *modes* are medieval scales. Just like major and minor scales are different patterns of whole steps and half steps, the modes are yet other patterns.

The most common medieval mode was the Dorian mode. It goes “re mi fa so la ti do re,” or is all the white keys on the keyboard starting on D. It is not the key of D Major - that has a C# and an F# in it. D Dorian shares the key signature of C Major and A Minor - no sharps or flats.

You can do everything we just did, only use “re” as your tonic, and “la” as your fifth-above-tonic note. Bam, pow, it instantly sounds more medieval. (Note: “re” does not have to be D. If your instrument is in the key of G Major, “re” for you is an A. You play G Major and A Dorian.)

The early medieval modes were:

Dorian: re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do-re

Phrygian: mi-fa-so-la-ti-do-re-mi

Lydian: fa-so-la-ti-do-re-mi-fa

Mixolydian: so-la-ti-do-re-me-fa-so

Later, Ionian (do-re-mi...) and Aeolian (la-ti-do-re...) were added – we know those two as the major and minor scales. The mode starting on “ti” is called Lochrian, which wasn’t very common.

### Use “Home and Away” Structure

Triad chords weren’t really in use until late in period. Instead, to give a feeling of motion, tunes sometimes went from a “home” position to an “away” position, and then returned. This happens both on a small scale (repeating a motif a step down) and on a larger scale (the song has an A part and a B part, played in different registers).

### *Repeating Motif at ‘Away’*

When you can play and repeat a motif that is a few bars long, try playing it once with the normal “closed” ending (the phrase ends on “re,” your Dorian tonic). Then repeat the motif a whole step down, so that the same phrase ends on “do.” Wrap up this part by either repeating the motif again at tonic, or improvising a new bit of melody that also ends at tonic.

### *A Part, B Part*

Play some melody generally in the range from “re” to “la.” You can use the repeating motif structure from above here, or any other methods you’ve learned. End this section with a closed ending.

Now move your improv up a fifth, so that you are playing between “la” and the “mi” above it. (You can use some notes to bridge this jump if you like, or not.) You can again use repeated motifs home and away, or you can do something else. When you are done playing “up here,” end your phrase nicely and transition back to the “re” to “la” register.

Many of the Cantigas de Santa Maria have these structures, as do French virelai. You can find them for free on YouTube. Listening to them, or learning to play them, might give you ideas for how to create sections in your improvisation.

### Ornamentation and Variation

Theorists believe that ornamentation (elaborating a simple tune) and variation (making small changes to the melody) were critical parts of the medieval musician’s skill set. You can apply them to tunes you know, or think of them as ways to embroider or evolve your improvisations.

Ornamentation includes grace notes (singly or in groups), trills, and glissandos.

Variation means taking some element of the melody and changing it, while preserving other parts of the melody. You might keep the same pattern of notes but invert them: aaF becomes aac for instance, changing the melody’s drop of a third to a rise of a third. You might take a rise of a third and explode it open to a jump of a fifth, and play some ornaments up there, before returning to the melody back down to where it ought to be. I find the trickiest thing about variation is not losing the skeleton of the actual tune in all of the dancing around with improvisations.