

Improvisation in a Steel Band Curriculum

Improvisation is a basic musicianship skill central to many of the world's musical traditions. Many music education programs in the United States, with their focus on ensemble playing, often leave very little room for students to develop this essential skill. As a result we have many proficient young musicians with virtually no experience improvising. In my own teaching I have come across students who are fearful or even opposed to the idea. This is a broad issue that requires significant effort to diagnose and address. For our purposes I would like to offer one possible opportunity to include more improvisation in music education through the avenue of Steel Band. In this article we will explore the why and the how of including improvisation as part of a Steel Band curriculum.

Since the early days of Steel Band music players have been improvising. Many of the early bands had musicians that were known as great soloists. As a teacher of Steel Band in the U.S. I consider myself a student of this uniquely Trinidadian instrument and style. I try to absorb as much as I can in my trips to Trinidad and it has been my experience that most of the skilled Trini players I have worked with are also proficient improvisers. This would also include most of the legendary arrangers who are incredible soloists. It seems that the thought process involved with improv is part of what informs the pan players overall musicianship. Pan players must have high capacity for aural recognition and memorization, both skills augmented by practicing improvisation. And for many pan arrangers and composers improvisation plays a role in their creative process. Soloing comes with the territory and is part of the skill set necessary to be a well rounded pan player.

Another argument for why to include improv in a Steel Band curriculum is that it can augment the student experience. Participation in a Steel Band helps students develop so many musical skills; ensemble awareness, sense of groove, rhythmic precision, etc. Add to that list an introduction to basic improvisation concepts. Steel Band can provide an opportunity for students to overcome the fear mentioned earlier. Many students in my band are woodwind, brass, or vocalists who play pan as a secondary instrument. The experience of playing in a Steel Band is already outside of their comfort zone and many students seem willing to take risks beyond what they may do on their primary instrument. Using the method described here I have had several students develop their improv chops on pan then go on to become proficient improvisers on their primary instrument.

In a steel band rehearsal, as with any ensemble, it is important to be mindful of how you spend your time, which can often be limited. Directors are often trying to balance teaching technique, stylistic interpretation, and of course learning repertoire for a concert. It might be tough to find time for improvisation but in my experience I have found that significant progress can be made with careful planning and the right approach. The step by step method laid out here would be implemented over the course of several rehearsals each with a small amount of time dedicated to this

practice. While this article is focussed on applying this methods in an ensemble setting, this can be easily adapted to work in a private lessons situation.

Session 1 - 4 notes

- 1.) The first step with inexperienced improvisers is to give them a very small amount of musical material with which to work. This could be just 3 or 4 notes, I suggest scale degrees 1,2,3,5 on a major scale. Have the students experiment with those 4 notes on their own allowing everyone to get the pattern of ascending and descending.
- 2.) At this point get a rhythm going in the engine room and a simple chord progression in the background pans. Something with a I - I - ii - V type chord progression will work well. This is a simple vamp from an arrangement of *Trouble in Arima* by Lord Kitchener:

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Seconds, Guitars, and Bass. The music is in 4/4 time and features a 4-note vamp. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The Seconds part is written in treble clef and consists of a sequence of chords: F2, G2, A2, Bb2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, Bb5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, Bb6, C7, D7, E7, F7, G7, A7, Bb7, C8, D8, E8, F8, G8, A8, Bb8, C9, D9, E9, F9, G9, A9, Bb9, C10, D10, E10, F10, G10, A10, Bb10, C11, D11, E11, F11, G11, A11, Bb11, C12, D12, E12, F12, G12, A12, Bb12, C13, D13, E13, F13, G13, A13, Bb13, C14, D14, E14, F14, G14, A14, Bb14, C15, D15, E15, F15, G15, A15, Bb15, C16, D16, E16, F16, G16, A16, Bb16, C17, D17, E17, F17, G17, A17, Bb17, C18, D18, E18, F18, G18, A18, Bb18, C19, D19, E19, F19, G19, A19, Bb19, C20, D20, E20, F20, G20, A20, Bb20, C21, D21, E21, F21, G21, A21, Bb21, C22, D22, E22, F22, G22, A22, Bb22, C23, D23, E23, F23, G23, A23, Bb23, C24, D24, E24, F24, G24, A24, Bb24, C25, D25, E25, F25, G25, A25, Bb25, C26, D26, E26, F26, G26, A26, Bb26, C27, D27, E27, F27, G27, A27, Bb27, C28, D28, E28, F28, G28, A28, Bb28, C29, D29, E29, F29, G29, A29, Bb29, C30, D30, E30, F30, G30, A30, Bb30, C31, D31, E31, F31, G31, A31, Bb31, C32, D32, E32, F32, G32, A32, Bb32, C33, D33, E33, F33, G33, A33, Bb33, C34, D34, E34, F34, G34, A34, Bb34, C35, D35, E35, F35, G35, A35, Bb35, C36, D36, E36, F36, G36, A36, Bb36, C37, D37, E37, F37, G37, A37, Bb37, C38, D38, E38, F38, G38, A38, Bb38, C39, D39, E39, F39, G39, A39, Bb39, C40, D40, E40, F40, G40, A40, Bb40, C41, D41, E41, F41, G41, A41, Bb41, C42, D42, E42, F42, G42, A42, Bb42, C43, D43, E43, F43, G43, A43, Bb43, C44, D44, E44, F44, G44, A44, Bb44, C45, D45, E45, F45, G45, A45, Bb45, C46, D46, E46, F46, G46, A46, Bb46, C47, D47, E47, F47, G47, A47, Bb47, C48, D48, E48, F48, G48, A48, Bb48, C49, D49, E49, F49, G49, A49, Bb49, C50, D50, E50, F50, G50, A50, Bb50, C51, D51, E51, F51, G51, A51, Bb51, C52, D52, E52, F52, G52, A52, Bb52, C53, D53, E53, F53, G53, A53, Bb53, C54, D54, E54, F54, G54, A54, Bb54, C55, D55, E55, F55, G55, A55, Bb55, C56, D56, E56, F56, G56, A56, Bb56, C57, D57, E57, F57, G57, A57, Bb57, C58, D58, E58, F58, G58, A58, Bb58, C59, D59, E59, F59, G59, A59, Bb59, C60, D60, E60, F60, G60, A60, Bb60, C61, D61, E61, F61, G61, A61, Bb61, C62, D62, E62, F62, G62, A62, Bb62, C63, D63, E63, F63, G63, A63, Bb63, C64, D64, E64, F64, G64, A64, Bb64, C65, D65, E65, F65, G65, A65, Bb65, C66, D66, E66, F66, G66, A66, Bb66, C67, D67, E67, F67, G67, A67, Bb67, C68, D68, E68, F68, G68, A68, Bb68, C69, D69, E69, F69, G69, A69, Bb69, C70, D70, E70, F70, G70, A70, Bb70, C71, D71, E71, F71, G71, A71, Bb71, C72, D72, E72, F72, G72, A72, Bb72, C73, D73, E73, F73, G73, A73, Bb73, C74, D74, E74, F74, G74, A74, Bb74, C75, D75, E75, F75, G75, A75, Bb75, C76, D76, E76, F76, G76, A76, Bb76, C77, D77, E77, F77, G77, A77, Bb77, C78, D78, E78, F78, G78, A78, Bb78, C79, D79, E79, F79, G79, A79, Bb79, C80, D80, E80, F80, G80, A80, Bb80, C81, D81, E81, F81, G81, A81, Bb81, C82, D82, E82, F82, G82, A82, Bb82, C83, D83, E83, F83, G83, A83, Bb83, C84, D84, E84, F84, G84, A84, Bb84, C85, D85, E85, F85, G85, A85, Bb85, C86, D86, E86, F86, G86, A86, Bb86, C87, D87, E87, F87, G87, A87, Bb87, C88, D88, E88, F88, G88, A88, Bb88, C89, D89, E89, F89, G89, A89, Bb89, C90, D90, E90, F90, G90, A90, Bb90, C91, D91, E91, F91, G91, A91, Bb91, C92, D92, E92, F92, G92, A92, Bb92, C93, D93, E93, F93, G93, A93, Bb93, C94, D94, E94, F94, G94, A94, Bb94, C95, D95, E95, F95, G95, A95, Bb95, C96, D96, E96, F96, G96, A96, Bb96, C97, D97, E97, F97, G97, A97, Bb97, C98, D98, E98, F98, G98, A98, Bb98, C99, D99, E99, F99, G99, A99, Bb99, C100, D100, E100, F100, G100, A100, Bb100, C101, D101, E101, F101, G101, A101, Bb101, C102, D102, E102, F102, G102, A102, Bb102, C103, D103, E103, F103, G103, A103, Bb103, C104, D104, E104, F104, G104, A104, Bb104, C105, D105, E105, F105, G105, A105, Bb105, C106, D106, E106, F106, G106, A106, Bb106, C107, D107, E107, F107, G107, A107, Bb107, C108, D108, E108, F108, G108, A108, Bb108, C109, D109, E109, F109, G109, A109, Bb109, C110, D110, E110, F110, G110, A110, Bb110, C111, D111, E111, F111, G111, A111, Bb111, C112, D112, E112, F112, G112, A112, Bb112, C113, D113, E113, F113, G113, A113, Bb113, C114, D114, E114, F114, G114, A114, Bb114, C115, D115, E115, F115, G115, A115, Bb115, C116, D116, E116, F116, G116, A116, Bb116, C117, D117, E117, F117, G117, A117, Bb117, C118, D118, E118, F118, G118, A118, Bb118, C119, D119, E119, F119, G119, A119, Bb119, C120, D120, E120, F120, G120, A120, Bb120, C121, D121, E121, F121, G121, A121, Bb121, C122, D122, E122, F122, G122, A122, Bb122, C123, D123, E123, F123, G123, A123, Bb123, C124, D124, E124, F124, G124, A124, Bb124, C125, D125, E125, F125, G125, A125, Bb125, C126, D126, E126, F126, G126, A126, Bb126, C127, D127, E127, F127, G127, A127, Bb127, C128, D128, E128, F128, G128, A128, Bb128, C129, D129, E129, F129, G129, A129, Bb129, C130, D130, E130, F130, G130, A130, Bb130, C131, D131, E131, F131, G131, A131, Bb131, C132, D132, E132, F132, G132, A132, Bb132, C133, D133, E133, F133, G133, A133, Bb133, C134, D134, E134, F134, G134, A134, Bb134, C135, D135, E135, F135, G135, A135, Bb135, C136, D136, E136, F136, G136, A136, Bb136, C137, D137, E137, F137, G137, A137, Bb137, C138, D138, E138, F138, G138, A138, Bb138, C139, D139, E139, F139, G139, A139, Bb139, C140, D140, E140, F140, G140, A140, Bb140, C141, D141, E141, F141, G141, A141, Bb141, C142, D142, E142, F142, G142, A142, Bb142, C143, D143, E143, F143, G143, A143, Bb143, C144, D144, E144, F144, G144, A144, Bb144, C145, D145, E145, F145, G145, A145, Bb145, C146, D146, E146, F146, G146, A146, Bb146, C147, D147, E147, F147, G147, A147, Bb147, C148, D148, E148, F148, G148, A148, Bb148, C149, D149, E149, F149, G149, A149, Bb149, C150, D150, E150, F150, G150, A150, Bb150, C151, D151, E151, F151, G151, A151, Bb151, C152, D152, E152, F152, G152, A152, Bb152, C153, D153, E153, F153, G153, A153, Bb153, C154, D154, E154, F154, G154, A154, Bb154, C155, D155, E155, F155, G155, A155, Bb155, C156, D156, E156, F156, G156, A156, Bb156, C157, D157, E157, F157, G157, A157, Bb157, C158, D158, E158, F158, G158, A158, Bb158, C159, D159, E159, F159, G159, A159, Bb159, C160, D160, E160, F160, G160, A160, Bb160, C161, D161, E161, F161, G161, A161, Bb161, C162, D162, E162, F162, G162, A162, Bb162, C163, D163, E163, F163, G163, A163, Bb163, C164, D164, E164, F164, G164, A164, Bb164, C165, D165, E165, F165, G165, A165, Bb165, C166, D166, E166, F166, G166, A166, Bb166, C167, D167, E167, F167, G167, A167, Bb167, C168, D168, E168, F168, G168, A168, Bb168, C169, D169, E169, F169, G169, A169, Bb169, C170, D170, E170, F170, G170, A170, Bb170, C171, D171, E171, F171, G171, A171, Bb171, C172, D172, E172, F172, G172, A172, Bb172, C173, D173, E173, F173, G173, A173, Bb173, C174, D174, E174, F174, G174, A174, Bb174, C175, D175, E175, F175, G175, A175, Bb175, C176, D176, E176, F176, G176, A176, Bb176, C177, D177, E177, F177, G177, A177, Bb177, C178, D178, E178, F178, G178, A178, Bb178, C179, D179, E179, F179, G179, A179, Bb179, C180, D180, E180, F180, G180, A180, Bb180, C181, D181, E181, F181, G181, A181, Bb181, C182, D182, E182, F182, G182, A182, Bb182, C183, D183, E183, F183, G183, A183, Bb183, C184, D184, E184, F184, G184, A184, Bb184, C185, D185, E185, F185, G185, A185, Bb185, C186, D186, E186, F186, G186, A186, Bb186, C187, D187, E187, F187, G187, A187, Bb187, C188, D188, E188, F188, G188, A188, Bb188, C189, D189, E189, F189, G189, A189, Bb189, C190, D190, E190, F190, G190, A190, Bb190, C191, D191, E191, F191, G191, A191, Bb191, C192, D192, E192, F192, G192, A192, Bb192, C193, D193, E193, F193, G193, A193, Bb193, C194, D194, E194, F194, G194, A194, Bb194, C195, D195, E195, F195, G195, A195, Bb195, C196, D196, E196, F196, G196, A196, Bb196, C197, D197, E197, F197, G197, A197, Bb197, C198, D198, E198, F198, G198, A198, Bb198, C199, D199, E199, F199, G199, A199, Bb199, C200, D200, E200, F200, G200, A200, Bb200, C201, D201, E201, F201, G201, A201, Bb201, C202, D202, E202, F202, G202, A202, Bb202, C203, D203, E203, F203, G203, A203, Bb203, C204, D204, E204, F204, G204, A204, Bb204, C205, D205, E205, F205, G205, A205, Bb205, C206, D206, E206, F206, G206, A206, Bb206, C207, D207, E207, F207, G207, A207, Bb207, C208, D208, E208, F208, G208, A208, Bb208, C209, D209, E209, F209, G209, A209, Bb209, C210, D210, E210, F210, G210, A210, Bb210, C211, D211, E211, F211, G211, A211, Bb211, C212, D212, E212, F212, G212, A212, Bb212, C213, D213, E213, F213, G213, A213, Bb213, C214, D214, E214, F214, G214, A214, Bb214, C215, D215, E215, F215, G215, A215, Bb215, C216, D216, E216, F216, G216, A216, Bb216, C217, D217, E217, F217, G217, A217, Bb217, C218, D218, E218, F218, G218, A218, Bb218, C219, D219, E219, F219, G219, A219, Bb219, C220, D220, E220, F220, G220, A220, Bb220, C221, D221, E221, F221, G221, A221, Bb221, C222, D222, E222, F222, G222, A222, Bb222, C223, D223, E223, F223, G223, A223, Bb223, C224, D224, E224, F224, G224, A224, Bb224, C225, D225, E225, F225, G225, A225, Bb225, C226, D226, E226, F226, G226, A226, Bb226, C227, D227, E227, F227, G227, A227, Bb227, C228, D228, E228, F228, G228, A228, Bb228, C229, D229, E229, F229, G229, A229, Bb229, C230, D230, E230, F230, G230, A230, Bb230, C231, D231, E231, F231, G231, A231, Bb231, C232, D232, E232, F232, G232, A232, Bb232, C233, D233, E233, F233, G233, A233, Bb233, C234, D234, E234, F234, G234, A234, Bb234, C235, D235, E235, F235, G235, A235, Bb235, C236, D236, E236, F236, G236, A236, Bb236, C237, D237, E237, F237, G237, A237, Bb237, C238, D238, E238, F238, G238, A238, Bb238, C239, D239, E239, F239, G239, A239, Bb239, C240, D240, E240, F240, G240, A240, Bb240, C241, D241, E241, F241, G241, A241, Bb241, C242, D242, E242, F242, G242, A242, Bb242, C243, D243, E243, F243, G243, A243, Bb243, C244, D244, E244, F244, G244, A244, Bb244, C245, D245, E245, F245, G245, A245, Bb245, C246, D246, E246, F246, G246, A246, Bb246, C247, D247, E247, F247, G247, A247, Bb247, C248, D248, E248, F248, G248, A248, Bb248, C249, D249, E249, F249, G249, A249, Bb249, C250, D250, E250, F250, G250, A250, Bb250, C251, D251, E251, F251, G251, A251, Bb251, C252, D252, E252, F252, G252, A252, Bb252, C253, D253, E253, F253, G253, A253, Bb253, C254, D254, E254, F254, G254, A254, Bb254, C255, D255, E255, F255, G255, A255, Bb255, C256, D256, E256, F256, G256, A256, Bb256, C257, D257, E257, F257, G257, A257, Bb257, C258, D258, E258, F258, G258, A258, Bb258, C259, D259, E259, F259, G259, A259, Bb259, C260, D260, E260, F260, G260, A260, Bb260, C261, D261, E261, F261, G261, A261, Bb261, C262, D262, E262, F262, G262, A262, Bb262, C263, D263, E263, F263, G263, A263, Bb263, C264, D264, E264, F264, G264, A264, Bb264, C265, D265, E265, F265, G265, A265, Bb265, C266, D266, E266, F266, G266, A266, Bb266, C267, D267, E267, F267, G267, A267, Bb267, C268, D268, E268, F268, G268, A268, Bb268, C269, D269, E269, F269, G269, A269, Bb269, C270, D270, E270, F270, G270, A270, Bb270, C271, D271, E271, F271, G271, A271, Bb271, C272, D272, E272, F272, G272, A272, Bb272, C273, D273, E273, F273, G273, A273, Bb273, C274, D274, E274, F274, G274, A274, Bb274, C275, D275, E275, F275, G275, A275, Bb275, C276, D276, E276, F276, G276, A276, Bb276, C277, D277, E277, F277, G277, A277, Bb277, C278, D278, E278, F278, G278, A278, Bb278, C279, D279, E279, F279, G279, A279, Bb279, C280, D280, E280, F280, G280, A280, Bb280, C281, D281, E281, F281, G281, A281, Bb281, C282, D282, E282, F282, G282, A282, Bb282, C283, D283, E283, F283, G283, A283, Bb283, C284, D284, E284, F284, G284, A284, Bb284, C285, D285, E285, F285, G285, A285, Bb285, C286, D286, E286, F286, G286, A286, Bb286, C287, D287, E287, F287, G287, A287, Bb287, C288, D288, E288, F288, G288, A288, Bb288, C289, D289, E289, F289, G289, A289, Bb289, C290, D290, E290, F290, G290, A290, Bb290, C291, D291, E291, F291, G291, A291, Bb291, C292, D292, E292, F292, G292, A292, Bb292, C293, D293, E293, F293, G293, A293, Bb293, C294, D294, E294, F294, G294, A294, Bb294, C295, D295, E295, F295, G295, A295, Bb295, C296, D296, E296, F296, G296, A296, Bb296, C297, D297, E297, F297, G297, A297, Bb297, C298, D298, E298, F298, G298, A298, Bb298, C299, D299, E299, F299, G299, A299, Bb299, C300, D300, E300, F300, G300, A300, Bb300, C301, D301, E301, F301, G301, A301, Bb301, C302, D302, E302, F302, G302, A302, Bb302, C303, D303, E303, F303, G303, A303, Bb303, C304, D304, E304, F304, G304, A304, Bb304, C305, D305, E305, F305, G305, A305, Bb305, C306, D306, E306, F306, G306, A306, Bb306, C307, D307, E307, F307, G307, A307, Bb307, C308, D308, E308, F308, G308, A308, Bb308, C309, D309, E309, F309, G309, A309, Bb309, C310, D310, E310, F310, G310, A310, Bb310, C311, D311, E311, F311, G311, A311, Bb311, C312, D312, E312, F312, G312, A312, Bb312, C313, D313, E313, F313, G313, A313, Bb313, C314, D314, E314, F314, G314, A314, Bb314, C315, D315, E315, F315, G315, A315, Bb315, C316, D316, E316, F316, G316, A316, Bb316, C317, D317, E317, F317, G317, A317, Bb317, C318, D318, E318, F318, G318, A318, Bb318, C319, D319, E319, F319, G319, A319, Bb319, C320, D320, E320, F320, G320, A320, Bb320, C321, D321, E321, F321, G321, A321, Bb321, C322, D322, E322, F322, G322, A322, Bb322, C323, D323, E323, F323, G323, A323, Bb323, C324, D324, E324, F324, G324, A324, Bb324, C325, D325, E325, F325, G325, A325, Bb325, C326, D326, E326, F326, G326, A326, Bb326, C327, D327, E327, F327, G327, A327, Bb327, C328, D328, E328, F328, G328, A328, Bb328, C329, D329, E329, F329, G329, A329, Bb329, C330, D330, E330, F330, G330, A330, Bb330, C331, D331, E331, F331, G331, A331, Bb331, C332, D332, E332, F332, G332, A332, Bb332, C333, D333, E333, F333, G333, A333, Bb333, C334, D334, E334, F334, G334, A334, Bb334, C335, D335, E335, F335, G335, A335, Bb335, C336, D336, E336, F336, G336, A336, Bb336, C337, D337, E337, F337, G337, A337, Bb337, C338, D338, E338, F338, G338, A338, Bb338, C339, D339, E339, F339, G339, A339, Bb339, C340, D340, E340, F340, G340, A340, Bb340, C341, D341, E341, F341, G341, A341, Bb341, C342, D342, E342, F342, G342, A342, Bb342, C343, D343, E343, F343, G343, A343, Bb343, C344, D344, E344, F344, G344, A344, Bb344, C345, D345, E345, F345, G345, A345, Bb345, C346, D346, E346, F346, G346, A346, Bb346, C347, D347, E347, F347, G347, A347, Bb347, C348, D348, E348, F348, G348, A348, Bb348, C349, D349, E349, F349, G349, A349, Bb349, C350, D350, E350, F350, G350, A350, Bb350, C351, D351, E351, F351, G351, A351, Bb351, C352, D352, E352, F352, G352, A352, Bb352, C353, D353, E353, F353, G353, A353, Bb353, C354, D354, E354, F354, G354, A354, Bb354, C355, D355, E3

2.) Get the background pans and engine room going on the same vamp and take another round of solos using this slightly expanded pallet. In an ensemble setting this can be done in just the key of whatever tune you're working on. In a private lesson you would want to do this in all 12 keys.

3.) After students understand the pentatonic scale I often will add a chromatic note between the second and third, sometimes referred to as the "sweet" scale. This is simply the major version of what we often call the "blues" scale. This opens up many possibilities and students will usually get excited about this new color.

4.) At this point in the process it's important for the students to hear someone demonstrate a great sounding solo using only these melodic ingredients. It can be a powerful moment for many students when they realize a well-developed, exciting sounding solo was created using these simple melodic concepts.

5.) Before moving to the next step students must also spend some time working with and improvising using major and minor scales, and perhaps even some modes depending on the type of tune they're working with. This could be an individual practice assignment.

Session 3 - Creating Licks

At this point many students find themselves playing what almost sounds like scale exercises. This is where it is very useful to start developing a vocabulary of idiomatic and stylistically appropriate licks. The most successful method I have found is to start with just a short list of simple and rhythmically undefined phrases. The idea here is to provide some musical material with which the students can practice in a creative way as they develop their own soloing style. Licks can also help students develop a sense of the particular tonal qualities of each pitch in a given scale and how to approach those colorful tones like the chromatic pitch in the blues scale or the 4th and 7th of the major scale. Every student will respond to this process differently and may require varying levels of guidance. (For the purpose of this article I will include notated examples, however, in practice this can all be taught aurally and through modeling.)

1.) Without notation or a defined rhythm, teach students the following phrase:



2.) Get the background pans and engine room playing a simple vamp. This can work in many styles but a good place to start would be a mid-tempo calypso. You could stick with the same vamp from the previous sessions. If you would like some variety but sticking with the same key here is a vamp from Kitchner's *Old Lady Walk a Mile*. This has a ii7 - V7 - I harmonic progression:

2.) Next students can create longer phrases by expand the note values, adding rolls, repeating figures and retro-grading the phrase. Here are a couple examples to begin with:



Notice that these include rhythms stylistically appropriate in a calypso style. If developing a different style the phrases would take on a different character.

3.) Finally, students should take these phrases through several different hemiola ideas, finding licks that fall over the bar line creating momentum and rhythmic tension. This is very common when soloing in most Caribbean/Latin styles.



Or something more complicated:



After applying some or all of these concepts to just one phrase students will begin to feel more comfortable improvising. In moving through this process students are not only developing a vocabulary but also becoming more confident with the idea of improvising.

The method presented here is by nature flexible to meet the needs of different types of bands. Feel free to rework these ideas how you see fit. There are many ways to approach improvisation and even more ways to experience it from a student perspective. With the right instruction, learning how to solo can be an empowering journey of self-discovery for a young musician. Students may find creativity they never knew they had. Being part such a journey is a thrilling experience for a music educator.

Start implementing some of these methods in your curriculum and before long you will notice results and soon you have a whole band full of pan improvisers.

- Patrick Fitzgibbon

The following are several more common phrases that students can work through using a similar process; rhythmic variation, rhythmic displacement, expansion, and hemiola. For simplicities sake I will stick with F major.

The image displays eight musical phrases in F major, arranged in two columns and four rows. Each phrase is written on a single staff in treble clef with a common time signature. The phrases illustrate various rhythmic and melodic techniques:

- Row 1, Left: A simple melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4.
- Row 1, Right: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a slight rhythmic variation.
- Row 2, Left: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a sharp sign indicating a chromatic alteration.
- Row 2, Right: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a sharp sign indicating a chromatic alteration.
- Row 3, Left: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a flat sign indicating a chromatic alteration.
- Row 3, Right: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a flat sign indicating a chromatic alteration.
- Row 4, Left: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a sharp sign indicating a chromatic alteration.
- Row 4, Right: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a sharp sign indicating a chromatic alteration.

Most of these phrases can work in D minor as well. And of course for any student really looking to become a proficient improviser these should be done in all keys.

Beyond these pentatonic and “bluesy” type phrases there are also several common diatonic scale patterns that pan players use often while improvising:

The image displays two musical phrases in F major, arranged in two rows. Each phrase is written on a single staff in treble clef with a common time signature. The phrases illustrate diatonic scale patterns:

- Row 1: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a flat sign indicating a chromatic alteration. The phrase ends with "etc..".
- Row 2: A melodic line starting on F4, moving up stepwise to C5, then down to F4, with a flat sign indicating a chromatic alteration. The phrase ends with "etc..".

Again these phrases can be developed in a number of ways similar to the method described above. With this basic vocabulary students can begin to develop their skills and hopefully be inspired to delve further into the art of improvisation.

At this point we have only briefly discussed harmony and the type of accompaniment appropriate for this type of teaching method. It's important to find the right piece or section where students can feel comfortable experimenting with improv for the first time. The most important thing is to keep it simple. I have made the mistake of challenging a student to improvise over a set of complex chord changes before they were ready. It can be a frustrating experience and can turn students off to the whole idea. In my own playing I have dedicated lots of time translating jazz language onto the pan. I have had success sharing this approach with students in private lessons but not as part of a steel band curriculum. When teaching a full steel band there is not enough time to break down a tune down chord by chord and discuss the melodic implications of each, as I might do in a private lesson. For a first time improviser it's better if all they need to think about is the key involved, not the harmonic progression.

I have already provided a few examples of Lord Kitchener's music which include ii - V - I type progressions. Progressions that involve I IV V can also work great. For example, have students try to improvise over the A section of Boogsie Sharpe's "Sarah". It follows a I IV I V progression. Here is an open vamp for soloing I included in an arrangement of David Rudder's "The Hammer". This simple progression comes from the main theme of the tune; IV V I.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for an open vamp in 4/4 time, set in a minor key (one flat). The top staff is labeled "Seconds" and contains a melodic line with eighth notes and rests. The middle staff is labeled "Guitars" and contains a chordal accompaniment with chords and rests. The bottom staff is labeled "Bass" and contains a bass line with quarter notes and eighth notes. The notation includes a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.

For students to experiment improvising in a minor key try the open solo vamp from Liam Teague's arrangement of "Conscious Chutney". This progression (i bVII bVI V) is great for students to work with the minor pentatonic, minor blues, natural and harmonic minor scales. Another excellent tune to work with the minor blues scale is Boogsie Sharpe's "Sunday Morning Funk". The progression includes some jazz harmonies (i - i(M7) - i(m7) - IV7 - VI(M7) - V(sus7) - V7) but stays grounded in one tonal center enough that an improviser can still get by without making the chord changes.

Branching further into the jazz realm but still approachable for many beginning improvisers is Freddie Hubbard's "Red Clay". This jazz/funk classic works great for

steel band and can be a vehicle for pan musicians to try their hand soloing in a different style. The solo vamp starts in a minor key, briefly moves to the VI then loops right back to the tonic. There is some jazz harmony involved so a student working on jazz language (251 licks, guide tone lines, etc.) would have a chance to explore those ideas. However, it is simple enough that a student working with the blues scale can sound great as well. This is the solo vamp from my arrangement:

The musical score is written for three instruments: Secondsn, Guitars, and Bass. It is in 4/4 time and the key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The piece consists of two measures, each ending with a repeat sign. The Secondsn part is in the treble clef and features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a chromatic descent in the second measure. The Guitars part is in the bass clef and provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and arpeggiated figures. The Bass part is also in the bass clef and plays a steady eighth-note pattern.

The method presented here is by nature flexible to meet the needs of different types of bands. Feel free to rework these ideas how you see fit. There are many ways to approach improvisation and even more ways to experience it from a student perspective. With the right instruction, learning how to solo can be an empowering journey of self-discovery for a young musician. Students may find creativity they never knew they had. Being part such a journey is a thrilling experience for a music educator. Start implementing some of these methods in your curriculum and before long you will notice results and soon you have a whole band full of pan improvisers.

- Patrick Fitzgibbon