

Handout for Pan Improvisation Fundamentals

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Improvisation is an essential skill for any proficient pan player. Since the early days of the Steel Band tradition improvisation has had its place in pan music. Many legendary pan innovators are also great improvisers. For players new to the idea, improvisation can be illusive, frustrating and even frightening.

Here we will answer the question “where do I begin” by outlining a method for getting started improvising on steel pan.

These exercises are designed for tenor and double seconds pans but can be adapted to any of the voices of a steel band.

These ideas can be implemented in a private lesson or ensemble setting.

Start with a simple, repetitive harmonic progression. For our purposes will use the following ii-V-I progression played at a medium tempo in the key of F, in a calypso style:

The musical notation shows a 4-measure ii-V-I progression in the key of F major. The top staff is for Seconds (treble clef), the middle for Guitars (bass clef), and the bottom for Bass (bass clef). The progression is: Dm7 (F-A-C-E) - G7 (B-D-F-A) - F (A-C-A-C).

1.) Start with just 3 notes. Using only these 3 pitches create some phrases for students to repeat back in real time. Then let the students improvise phrases to be repeated by the rest of the band. Next, try some trading in 4-bar phrases. In order to make everyone comfortable in a group setting you can have everyone solo all at once before you move on to trading with individuals.

3 pitches only:

- repeat after me
- repeat after you
- trading all at once
- trading individuals

The musical notation shows three notes on a treble clef staff: F4, A4, and C5.

2.) The first scale we will work with is the F Major Pentatonic scale. Once students are comfortable with these note you can repeat step one, this time with 6 notes.

The musical notation shows the F Major Pentatonic scale: F4, A4, C5, B4, G4, F4.

Outside of rehearsal have students practice this scale using the full range of their instrument in quarter notes, eighth notes and using the following rhythmic patterns:

cont...

cont...

cont...

cont...

