

Improvising and Composing with Familiar Rhythms, Drums, and Barred Instruments

Lesson 2

Brian Crisp

INSTRUCTIONAL: Lesson Two

Introduction

As students gather, begin playing one of the compositions from the last lesson. Invite the group to play this composition on the drums. After the piece is played, review the parameters of the composition: rhythmic counterpoint, the phrase form, etc. Have the entire class play its compositions again to review the rhythms. Some groups may need their visual reminders from the last class.

Exploration

Once the rhythmic pieces are secure, have students bring soprano or alto xylophones to their groups. The xylophones should be set up in F pentatonic. After the students are in F pentatonic, have each group play its rhythm using just the mallets as an unpitched percussion. Next, invite the groups to play their rhythms on the lowest F. After each group has played, have the groups play the rhythms on the F and the G. The point of this exercise is not for melodic line, but for rhythmic accuracy and correct mallet technique.

After time for transferring the rhythm to the barred instruments, have students compose a draft of a melody using the following pitches: D F F G A C D. Have them use D as the tonic and remind them of the phrase form. Students will need several minutes to collaborate on this project. Be careful not to intervene too quickly in student work. Allow each group the time needed to articulate and interact in the composition project.

When the students are ready, listen to the compositions. The scale is a wonderful way to assess students' security and accuracy with barred instrument playing. Most times these numbers can be indicated with the student's hand placed on the shoulder. Frequent inquiry about the progress will assist in pacing the class. Have students score themselves using a scale of 1-5, with 5 representing the best work in this sliding scale and 1 being the lowest score. If most students are scoring themselves with 4 or higher, they are ready for the next step. If the score is lower than 3, students simply need time to work.

Listen to each group play its composition. After every group has played, give two examples of melodies to your students. One of the examples should mainly use step-wise motion, intentional cadence in elemental style, correct mallet technique, dynamics, etc. The other example should be blatantly wrong with huge leaps, etc. Ask students which melody was most effective and why. Students should come up with a list that is similar to this:

- The melody used mainly step-wise motion.
- The melody had a defined melodic shape or contour.
- The melody employed pattern.
- The melody was memorable (I could sing it back rather easily).
- The tonic was approached by the note beside it, not a skip.

Listing these elements will give students a visual reminder. Have them score their melodies according to the above criteria. Most students will want to edit their melodies according to the constructing criteria for melody making. Before they return to work, ask students about the most important notes of the scale: the tonic, the dominant, and the upper and lower neighbors. Make a scale ladder for your students:

D
C

A Dominant
G
F Upper Neighbor

D Tonic
C Lower Neighbor

Ask students where the tonic must be played: the last note of the piece. Ask students where the dominant could be played: the beginning or end of a phrase. Ask students where the upper and lower neighbors should be played: at the final cadence, before the tonic. With all this information, students are ready to rework their existing melodies.

Culminating Aesthetic Moment

At this point the students will want to perform the compositions with accompaniment. With a simple tonic drone on D, students will have a steady tempo. Have them play their melodies in unison:

Bass xylophones	Group one	Group two	Group three
-----------------	-----------	-----------	-------------

Reflection for Learning

During the creation of new melodic pieces, ample time should be allowed for reflection and editing. The time will allow students to synthesize more information and have time to construct and retain information.

Assessment

Have students score themselves using the scale of 1-5. If the majority of students are showing a 5, then the next step of the process will be readily received. If students show 3-4, then more practice time as partners and individuals may be required. Lower than a 3 may require going back to initial rhythmic playing and repeating the steps. The following questions will provide for accurate assessment:

I can comfortably and accurately play my rhythmic composition on the xylophone while alternating mallets:

<i>I cannot play</i>		<i>I am almost accurate</i>		<i>I can perform all</i>
1	2	3	4	5

Our composition follows the phrase form A A B C:

<i>Phrase form is not accurate</i>		<i>is almost accurate</i>		<i>is completely accurate</i>
1	2	3	4	5

The composition uses all the criteria for effective melody making:

<i>Uses none of the criteria</i>		<i>uses some of the criteria</i>		<i>uses all the criteria</i>
1	2	3	4	5

I can play the whole piece accurately with alternating mallets:

<i>I cannot play the piece</i>		<i>I can play the rhythm only</i>		<i>I can play accurately</i>
1	2	3	4	5

I can play the piece with correct mallet technique and appropriate dynamics:

<i>I cannot play the piece</i>		<i>I can play but struggle</i>		<i>I can play accurately</i>
1	2	3	4	5