

Venturing into Vocal Improvisation

by Meg Tietz

One of the beautiful parts of Orff Schulwerk teaching is that there are so many different avenues toward creativity. Every teacher, during their Orff training, finds areas where they feel comfortable expressing themselves, and others that feel less natural and more exposed. This is part of the beauty. Everyone finds areas of comfort and challenge, ease and difficulty, success and struggle. This is one of the reasons that I believe Orff Schulwerk has such a human feel, and why so many of us left our training feeling not only more educated but also empowered and deeply connected. It allows us to better relate to the feelings our children are experiencing every day, both inside and outside of the classroom.

What happens when we return to our classrooms from our levels training, most of the time, is that we tend to lead students toward the creative avenues in which we ourselves feel most secure. This is only natural and makes perfect sense. When beginning a new endeavor, it is entirely reasonable to start with what feels most confident and to branch out from there. The trouble comes in when we do not, as the teacher, push ourselves beyond our comfort zone and into the areas of our own personal weaknesses or insecurities. If a child has many areas in their school life (or life in general) where they feel unsuccessful, and we neglect to offer an avenue that could be the one thing that child truly excels at, we are doing them a disservice.

For me, the area that took me the longest to implement in my teaching was vocal improvisation. I was a piano major in college, and although I've been in choirs my whole life and love singing, it is not an area where I feel safe or confident, especially while improvising. Because the singing voice is personal and exposed, I think it is easiest to start with your younger students who do not have the same level of inhibition your older students have. If you feed these children a steady diet of vocal improvisation year after year, by the time they are your "big kids" your expectations of safety, community, and adventure are already established and your environment for vocal exploration and improvisation is ready to go!

Early Elementary Vocal Improvisation Activities

It is in the nature of a child to vocally improvise. I have a 2-year-old test subject who lives at my house and can prove it. She improvises songs about the sun, her shoes, her friends at school, dinner, etc. A child WANTS to improvise: all day, all the time. Their voice is a natural first instrument to try it with.

MINI LESSON IDEA #1: ANSWERING QUESTIONS

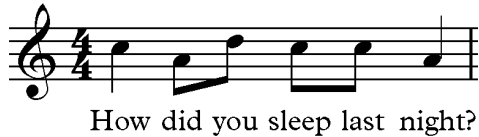
One of the easiest ways I've found to include vocal improvisation is in singing questions to my students and asking for them to sing me an answer. This is not the same thing as question and answer improvisation; I'm not hoping they stay within a specific pitch set or end on tonic or employ the rhythms I used. Sometimes they do, but that's not the goal. Truly, I'm just hoping they answer with a singing voice (and sometimes, that doesn't happen). The pitches they are singing are not as important as the fact that they are singing.

- What did you have for breakfast? What is your favorite color? What are you doing this weekend? What are you afraid of? What are you excited about?

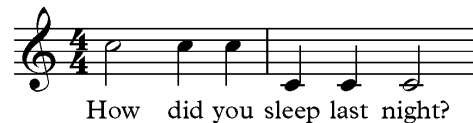
- You could also use these questions as a simple warm up, without a song to start with.
- You could sing these questions in any way you choose, for example, to:
 - Model high vs. low.
 - Use a specific pitch set that you are preparing.
 - Base your questions on the pitch set of the song you're using as the A section.
 - Use these questions to prepare a specific meter.

Examples:

(mi sol la)



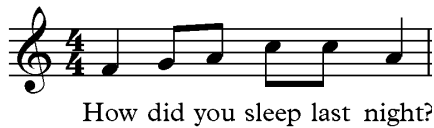
(High Low)



(Triple Meter)



(do re mi sol)

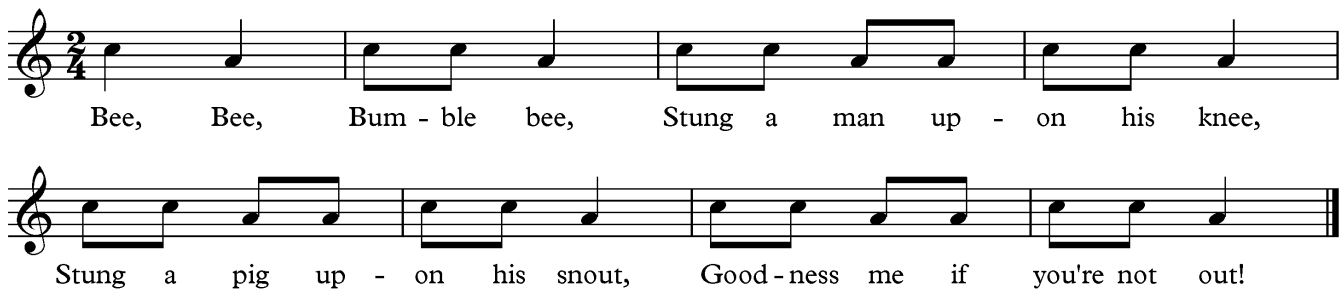


MINI LESSON IDEA #2: Using Building Blocks

GAME: Start by playing the elimination game (beat keeper in the center moves bee from hand to hand, if the bee lands on you on the word "out" you're out!).

Bee Bee Bumblebee

Traditional Nursery Rhyme



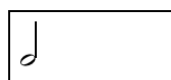
- Create a series of rhythmic building blocks that match the meter of a song or poem you are working on.



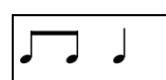
Horn-et



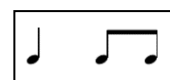
Yel-low jack-et



OW!



Hon-ey bee



Sun-flow-er

- Use bee building blocks to create a B section, performed first as speech to model a specific form (i.e. aab: Hornet, Hornet, Hornet, Honeybee)

- Try some examples as a group, then have students create their own pattern to match your desired form.
- Sing entire B section (the created rhythmic building block sentence) on sol, then all on mi.

Hor-net Hor-net Hor-net Hon-ey-bee

Hor-net Hor-net Hor-net Hon-ey-bee

- Improvise vocally moving between sol and mi as individuals choose. (Everyone is improvising at the same time using their own rhythms from earlier).

- Example of what a child is singing:

Hor-net Hor-net Hor-net Hon-ey-bee

- Example of what you hear while the whole class is singing:

- Just so you're not surprised, you may also hear:

- (This happens in my room too. Don't give up)!

- If, however, your children don't have their rhythms secure, it shows you they aren't ready to add the melody yet. The rhythm must be confident before the melody can successfully be added.
- In subsequent lessons, ask soloists to improvise using sol and mi during the B section instead of performing as a full group.

MINI LESSON IDEA #3: Singing a Poem

Start with a poem that is appropriate for whichever age group you are working with. A shorter poem will work better than a longer one for this activity. If it has multiple stanzas, choose one.

- Speak the (previously learned) poem together.

Hump - ty Dump - ty sat on a wall. Hump - ty Dump - ty had a great fall.

All the king's hor ses and all the king's men, could-n't put Hump-ty to - ge ther a gain.

- Ask the children to sing the whole poem on one specific pitch. In my example, I'm leading toward mi-sol-la improvisation, so I'm starting on sol. Model this for them:

Hump - ty Dump - ty sat on a wall. Hump - ty Dump - ty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men, Could-n't put Hump-ty to - ge ther a gain.

- Now model a couple of predictable examples using sol and mi. Something like:

Hump - ty Dump - ty sat on a wall. Hump - ty Dump - ty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men, Could-n't put Hump-ty to - ge ther a gain.

OR

Hump - ty Dump - ty sat on a wall. Hump - ty Dump - ty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men, Could-n't put Hump-ty to - ge ther a gain.

- Ask the students to make up a song using sol and mi. Depending on the age of your students, you can label these pitches or not. For example, in Kindergarten, where they haven't identified sol-mi yet, I might sing something like:

Use this note or this note to make up your song for me!

- In a future lesson, model making up a melody using sol, mi, and la. Then, ask them to do the same.

Intermediate Elementary Vocal Improvisation

Before vocal improvisation can be successful with your older students, it is imperative that you have established a culture of safety and support. Children who do not feel safe will not expose their voice to others. As I mentioned earlier, you can grow into your improvisations with older students by building on what you have done with them in previous years.

MINI LESSON IDEA #4: Using Melodic Cells

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- Echo the following cells using solfege syllables. When I do this activity with my students, I model rhythms but do not write this out on the staff for them. Personally, I find that tying

notation to these cells makes it harder for children to feel comfortable changing the rhythmic or melodic ideas later.

s s m

s l s m

d r m

s l d'

d' l s

m r d

- Practice “changing” the cells together by keeping the main idea but repeating syllables or changing their rhythm.



sol sol mi

might become



sol sol sol mi mi mi

or



sol sol mi mi

- I often help them to feel the length of the phrase by using a drum to play a measure duration or modeling phrases in the air with my arm (when my arm lowers the phrase is over).
- Decide which melodic motive is your favorite. Practice singing it over and over until you have decided on a way you like to sing it.
- Select a favorite and second favorite cell and decide how to link them together (which one sounds better going first?)
- Share your phrase with a neighbor. Decide how you could add your two melodies together.
- Decide how to put your phrases into an elemental form.
- Perform for the class.

This lesson idea could be adapted in many ways:

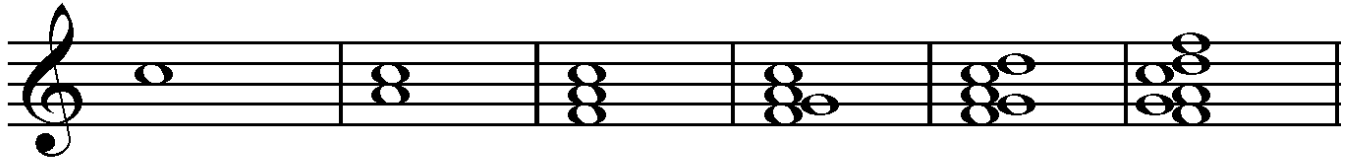
- These compositions could become the B section of a known melodic piece (vocal or instrumental).
- You could expand the pitch material to whatever the children are working on in that particular grade level.

MINI LESSON IDEA #5: Using Poetry (Again)

- Pick a beautiful (and short) piece of poetry. Don't be afraid of exposing children to something beautiful. For some children, you may be their one exposure to beautiful things. If they never experience it, they cannot expect or search for beauty in the world. Haikus work very well for this sort of activity, or one short stanza of a favorite poem.
- Tremelo on the pitch you want to use as tonic for your improvisation. Ask children to sing the poem, at their own tempo, on that pitch. They will finish at different times.
- Tremelo between two pitches. Ask them to use these two pitches to sing the poem
- Continue to expand your playing to include a pentatonic or diatonic scale. With each expansion, ask children to sing again.
- They might be using pitches beyond what you're playing. If so, great!

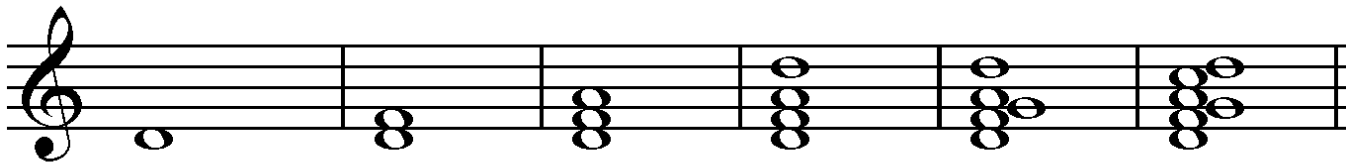
A possible progression of adding pitches to arrive at the do and la-based pentatonic scales might look like this: (I don't show the children this, although based on their comfort you could. I just play the tremelo on these pitches).

Do-based Pentatonic Scale Progression Possibility:



sol

La-based Pentatonic Scale Progression Possibility :



la

Final Thoughts: As you know, children are INCREDIBLY perceptive. They can sense fear in the same way that an animal does. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has ever been a substitute teacher. If you approach vocal improvisation warily, wariness will permeate your classroom. If you approach it with insecurity, insecurity will reflect back. However, if you approach vocal improvisation with joy, safety, and fun, that's exactly the same response you will receive. Be willing to make mistakes (often!) and enjoy trying! So much of what we do as educators involves a certain level of acting. Acting confident. Acting like this is the most fun game ever (even if we have played it 9 million times in our career). The more you act as though something is the most fun and best thing ever, the more it becomes so. Smart Small. Be brave. HAVE FUN!