

**Hickey, M. (2011). Can improvisation be 'taught'? A call for free improvisation in our schools. *International Journal of Music Education* 2009 27: 285 DOI: 10.1177/0255761409345442**

Hickey presents a fabulous question: can improvisation be taught in the education system. This meaning in the sense of acquiring skills and techniques to improvise “well”. Although Hickey presents an opposing view to this question, I myself hadn’t even thought about alternative ways to learn improvisation.

In private lessons I had always been given weekly improvisation homework. I was given a four bar melody and asked to “improvise” a four bar response. Yet, I was hardly improvising. My teacher gave me some “hints” about trying to copy the initial four bars in rhythm and, as much as possible, pitch. This would make it “easier” she said, and as long as I ended on the tonic chord then I had done the exercise “correctly”. This is quite similar to an example presented in the article. I never viewed it this way until now. I see how the current education system uses the question and answer technique, which really only emphasizes exact replication, or things sounding identical. I would agree that this is not improvising, and it cannot be taught in this sense.

We notice the clearly defined path to the “improvisation product” (Hickey, 291), but what is the desired product? To be able to copy and paste what we’ve heard? That doesn’t seem like improvisation to me. It only seems like a simple and easy way for teachers to evaluate their students, but the students are not experimenting with the true creative art of improvisation. Teachers are so quick to give children all the building blocks, as Hickey calls them, to ‘properly’ improvise. Yet, I found it very interesting, but not at all surprising, that a study by Coleman suggested that children are very capable of improvising on their own. They do not need complete guidance from adults. This idea of free improvisation is something we disregard too easily as it doesn’t sound ‘pretty’ or ‘structured’, but I think it could with practice and experimentation. Improvisation may come more naturally to some than to others, but it is something to be continually exercised in order for it to become more cohesive and, in a sense, technical. I don’t mean technical by teaching children skills to improvise, but that as children get more comfortable with free improvisation, they will build their own strategies and techniques.

I agree with Hickey that there needs to be a balance between complete freedom and fully prescribed techniques when teaching improvisation. Actually, I like how Hickey states that improvisation needs to be nurtured not taught, emphasizing that it is not a skill we practice in doses, but something that grows and matures with us. A point made that I hadn’t considered was, “how can we teach something that requires no preparation?” (Hickey, 287). When you think about the true definition of improvisation, you begin to see how contradictory it is to “teach” it. I do, however, think that improvisation can be considered a technique in the sense that it helps musicians in many other aspects of their

studies: self-expression, problem-solving, experimentation. Many of which Pressing had stated when explaining how we can possibly begin to nurture the concept of improvisation to children.

Although there are indeed many issues in implementing free improvisation into schools, the advantages outweigh it all. Yes, it will be hard at first. Children might not work the most effectively in group improv settings, it may not sound the greatest and it will be hard for hard for teachers to just sit back and listen. But it is over time that this will remedy itself. Once educators and children get used to this idea, are more exposed to it and delve into it, it will begin to feel natural, as it should!