

Improvisation Techniques

One definition of improvisation is “spontaneous composition,” that is, making things up as you go. In this lesson, we'll define improvisation more broadly to mean “modifying or enhancing a song.”

Why Improve?	2
Song Elements	3
Transposing	4
Shifting Octaves	5
Adding Intervals	6
Grace Notes, Crushes, Mordents	7
Chord Styles	8
Arpeggio Patterns	9
Chord Substitutions	10



Why Improvise?

A song is a “musical structure” so learning to play one might be compared to building a house. You could play a song exactly as written, which would be like following a house's architectural plans to the letter. But sometimes you may want to stray from the written specifications and *improvise*.

For example, when building or remodeling a house, you may want to modify the kitchen or bathrooms or add on a room or another story. Similarly, when playing a song, you may wish to transpose to a different Key, insert arpeggios, modify chords, or add an introduction or ending.

When some composers first write a song, they create a simplified Lead (lead) Sheet consisting of a single-note melody with chord symbols. Next, an arranger (who may or may not be the composer) takes the Lead Sheet and adds an introduction, notes to enhance the melody, chords to create rich harmony, bridges to join verses, and an ending to complete the song.

Different arrangers arrange songs differently. So in a sense, when you purchase sheet music, it has been “improvised” to the arranger's individual taste.

If you are happy with the arrangement you merely need learn to play it.

However, with a knowledge of Improv techniques if the arrangement is:

- * Too simple: You can embellish it by adding extra notes and chords.
- * Too complex: You can simplify it by playing only some of the notes, perhaps only the right-hand melody, adding in simplified chords.

And if you like to play songs by ear, once you pick out the melody and chords, you'll want to use a variety of improvisational techniques to enhance it, perhaps by playing chords in arpeggio patterns.

You can make many changes to a song without affecting its recognizability. As an example, consider the remakes of old songs that appear from time to time, with changes in tempo, chords, and even tones. These remakes are usually hits because they appeal to their original generation yet are arranged in the style of and popular with the current generation.

When you improvise, you are the boss!

Whatever you say goes.

You have immense freedom to experiment and be creative, which can be liberating or intimidating depending upon your point of view.

If you feel overwhelmed by the possibilities, remember that you don't *have* to make any changes unless you absolutely want to.

You are in charge!

To get the most out of this lesson, you may want to review the following lessons:
Chords * Chord Variations * Practical Music Theory

Song Elements

Intro

An introduction to begin a song can be any set of notes or chords that build up or prepare the listener for the main melody. The Key (scale) of the song gives clues as to which notes/chords would make the most sense. A simple solution for an intro is to play the last phrase or two of the song at the beginning of the song.

Melody

Also called the “tune,” the melody consists of the top or uppermost tones of the music, which are typically played with the right hand. It is the part that you can hum, whistle, or sing. In general, you should not add notes above the melody line, except the exact same notes an octave higher. The most common option is to add notes at pleasant-sounding intervals *below* the melody notes.



Harmony

The harmony consists of the tones or chords of the song generally played below the melody, usually with the left hand, that embellish the melody without changing it. Chords appropriate to the Key are the most obvious choice, but sometimes substituting a non-standard chord adds a level of interest.

Fill

Lead sheets often contain notes held for extended time counts. It can be boring to hold these tones for the indicated time, so various runs (tones played rapidly in succession), arpeggios, or chord progressions are added to “fill” in these areas. Between song verses or repeated sections, a fill may be called a “bridge,” “turnaround,” or “transitional passage.”

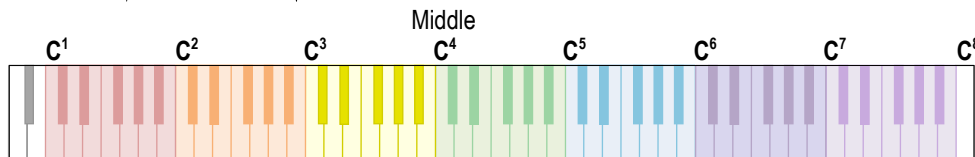
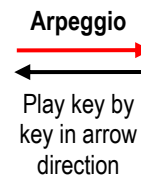
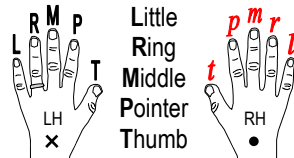
LEAD SHEET

Ending

An ending adds closure to a song. One way to end is to repeat the final chord of the song one octave, then two octaves higher (climbing) or lower (falling), or to end with an arpeggio run. Another option is to play the last phrase or phrases of music over and over, gradually “fading” out to silence.

Allcanplay Piano Notation

Match fingers to keys & play!



Transposing

For this activity,
print this page.

Transposing changes a song to a different Key.

Let's say you needed a lower-pitched version of a Happy Birthday songsheet whose high notes exceeded your voice range, or a higher-pitched version if the low notes are too low.

Transposing to a new Key on the fly takes years of experience and a working knowledge of scales and chords with their various accidentals. But transposing on paper is easy. Since Keys (scales) are built on a standard KeyCount, each key/tone/note/chord of the song will follow the same pattern.

To transpose, start at the current Root (Source) and count the keys to the desired Root (Target). Then apply the same count to every key/chord in the song.

ToDo: Play the following song portion in the given Key of C, then follow the transposing instructions.

Author: Rogers & Hammerstein
Year: 1959 (Sound of Music)
Tempo: Light & Fast

Do Re Mi

Key: C
Time: 2/4 (1+ = ♩)

Transpose C to A

From the Source Root Middle C⁴ it's 3 keys down to the Target Root A³. (For a higher pitch, we could have counted 9 keys up to A⁴).

Count down 3 keys for each remaining key in the song and pencil in the same finger letters as the Source.

Test your transposition by playing the song in the Key of A, which has 3 sharps: f[#] c[#] g[#].

Transpose the Chords

Count 3 keys down from C, the Root of the C chord to A, the Root of the A chord. Likewise from G7 to the E7 chord.

C ³	C ⁴	C ⁵		
			DOE	1
			1+2	
			A C Eb	
			A	+
			DEER	2
			1+2	
			A	+
			FE-	3
			1+	
			-MALE	2+
			DEER	4
			1+2+	
			RAY	5
			1+2	
			G7	
			A	+
			DROP	6
			1	
			OF	+
			GOL-	2
			-DEN	+
			SUN	7
			1+2+	

Transpose C to E^b

From the Source Root Middle C⁴ it's 3 keys up Target Root Eb⁴. (For a lower pitch, we could have counted 9 keys down to Eb³).

Count up 3 keys for each remaining key in the song and pencil in the same finger letters as the Source.

Test your transposition by playing the song in the Key of Eb, which has 3 flats: b^b e^b a^b.

Transpose the Chords

Count 3 keys up from C, the Root of the C chord to Eb, the Root of the Eb chord. Likewise from G7 to the Bb7 chord.

An efficient way to transpose chords is to use either the 88 & 5th Chart or the Transposer Chart which are described in and follow the Practical Music Theory lesson. In this case, C and G7 follow the I-V7 chord pattern.

Shifting Octaves

One of the simplest improvisations is to play the song as written but in a different octave.

Depending on the song, you might want to play the melody one octave higher, playing the chords in their normal octave. Or you might want to move both melody and chords up one octave. Or you could play one verse in the normal octave and the next verse in a different octave. The choice is yours!

ToDo: Play the following, shifting octaves as indicated.

Do Re Mi

	C ³	C ⁴	C ⁵	
L M T	t			DOE 1 1+2 C
L M T	p			A +
L M T	m			DEER 2 1+2
			Shift RH up one octave	A +
L M T			m	FE- 3 1+
L M T			t	-MALE 2+ 2+
L M T			m	DEER 4 1+2+
Shift LH up one octave		R PT	p	RAY 5 1+2 G7
			m	A +
R PT			r	DROP 6 1
R PT			r	OF +
R PT			m	GOL- 2 2
R PT			p	-DEN +
R PT			r	SUN 7 1+2+

Adding Intervals

To enhance a single-note melody, add intervals.

In general, intervals should be added *below* the melody keys, because the human ear generally hears the TOP tones of a song as the melody. Try adding a key 3, 4, or 5 keys below the melody key, or try adding keys that are part of the current scale or chord. It's also fine to add an octave-interval above each melody key since it mirrors the tune without changing it. In any case, the ultimate test is how it sounds.

ToDo: Play the following to hear how adding intervals enhances the tune.

Do Re Mi

	C ³	C ⁴	C ⁵	
DOE 1				1+2 C
5 keys below	t	m		
3 keys below		p	r	A +
		m	l	DEER 2
				1+2 A +
		t	m	
				FE- 3
		m	l	1+
		t	m	
				-MALE 2+
		m	l	DEER 4
				1+2+
		t	l	RAY 5
				1+2 G7
Maintain octave hand span. Watch only your thumb.	t		l	
	t		l	A +
		t	l	DROP 6
				1
		t	l	OF +
				GOL- 2
		t	l	2
				-DEN +
		t	l	SUN 7
				1+2+

Grace Notes, Crushes, Mordents

Halfstep (adjacent key) intervals can add a spark of excitement without altering the melody.

- * **Grace notes** are played quickly *before* the melody key.
- * **Crushes** play grace-melody together then release the grace while holding the melody key.
- * **Mordents** are played quickly in this order: melody-grace-melody.
- * **Trills** are extended mordents played quickly back and forth *several* times.

ToDo: Watch the accompanying video to hear how these effects sound, then try them yourself.

Do Re Mi

	C ³	C ⁴	C ⁵	
Grace Note Slide <i>m</i> quickly off Eb and hold on E for 1+2 count	DOE 1			1+2
	C			A +
Grace Note Play <i>p</i> rapidly and hold <i>m</i> for 1+ count	DEER 2			1+2
	A +			FE- 1+
Crush Play <i>t-p</i> together quickly, release <i>t</i> and hold <i>p</i> for 1+2 count	-MALE 2+			DEER 1+2+
	RAY 5			1+2
Mordent Play <i>r</i> quickly, then <i>m</i> quickly, then <i>r</i> again held for count	DROP 6			1
	OF +			GOL- 2
Trill Play <i>r m r</i> quickly several times	-DEN +			SUN 1+2+
	Repeat to Trill			

Chord Styles

Chords can be played in a variety of styles to enhance a song and create interest.

ToDo: Play the following song portion (converted to 4/4 time) with the various chord styles.

Do Re Mi

CHORD & NUMBERS

Chords are assigned Roman Numerals based on their position in the KeyScale.

For example, the chord whose Root is based on the first note of a scale, is the I Chord. Similarly, the chord whose Root is based on the 5th note of a scale is the V Chord.

The individual keys of a chord are assigned Arabic (standard) numbers based on the intervals of the underlying KeyScale.

For example, Major triads formed from the 1st, 3rd, and 5th keys of their scales are designated [1-3-5].

The Root is the 1 key, the Octave is the 8.

Two intervals above the Octave (KeyCount 4) is the 10 key.

This can be very confusing, so if you want to understand it better, review the *Practical Music Theory* lesson.

Block Chord	L M T	Vamp: Play rapidly 3 times	4-an-da
Broken Chord	L M T		DOE 1+ C
	M T		2
	M T		A +
Swing Bass	L M T		DEER 3+
	L M T		4
	L M T		A +
	L M T		FE- 1+
	L M T		-MALE 2+
	L M T		DEER 3+
Walking Bass / Run	L M T	Triplet 2 beats played as 3	4-an-da
	L M T		RAY 1+ G7
Swing Bass	R PT		2
	R PT		A +
	L		DROP 3
Arpeggio	P		OF +
	T		GOL- 4
	R PT		-DEN +
	R PT		SUN 1+2+3+4+

Vamp

A short passage used as an introduction or accompaniment that repeats, typically until the singer is ready.

Block Chord

Play all keys together. For a Major Triad, play [1-3-5].

Broken Chord

Play [Root] then rest of keys.
Major Triad: Play [1] then [3-5].
For 3-beats play [1][3-5][3-5].
* Waltz: [slow][slow][slow]
* Polka: [slow][quick][quick]

Swing Bass

Play [Root] an octave lower, then the chord, then [5] an octave lower, then chord, etc.

Cross Hands

Cross one hand over the other to play the harmony above the melody or vice versa.

Walking Bass / Run

Start with the bass key of the first chord and "run" (up or down on adjacent keys) to a key of the next chord.

Arpeggio

Play each key in sequence either up or down.

Arpeggio Patterns



Arpeggios (rolled chords) add life and movement to songs.

In general, you would use an arpeggio with enough keys to match the TimeCount of the held melody key. For example a 4-key arpeggio to match [1 + 2 +]. But you can also speed or slow the arpeggio to match any count.

You can play an accompanying arpeggio in any octave, but you want to start low enough so that it doesn't encroach on the melody area, which is usually around Middle C4. The C Chord is shown below, but the patterns can be applied to any chord. They can also be arpeggiated down or in a circular or irregular pattern.

ToDo: Play the displayed arpeggio variations.

	C ²	C ³	C ⁴	C ⁵	Intervals	
		L M T			1-3-5	ONE OCTAVE SPANS With a key span of eight or less, you can play arpeggios without looking. Frame the outer keys with your Little and Thumb and see where your other fingers naturally fall.
		L P T			1-5-8	
		L R P T			1-3-5-8	
		L R P T			1-3-5-8	Circular Play repeatedly up then down then up without pausing in a circular motion. Good for longer TimeCounts.
		R P			5-3	
	L	PT			1-5-6	Western When played repeatedly with a "loping" rhythm, this may remind you of a cowboy mozying along on his horse.
		P			5	
	L	T			1-5	Eerie This pattern has an ominous tone hinting of impending doom.
		P T			5 ^b -5	
	L	T			1-5	Music Box Imagine a tiny ballerina spinning around. (Start on C6 for the full effect.)
		M T			3-5	
Pivot on P rock T to 10	L	P	T		1-5-10	MULTI-OCTAVE SPANS Pivot (hold key down) on a thumb or finger to rock to or crossover/under to the adjacent octave. You can make any of these Circular. If a passage spans several octaves and there's not enough time to pivot and crossover/under, keep your hand stretched in octave span and move it rapidly up or down the keyboard.
Pivot on T crossover with P	L	T	P		1-8-10	
Pivot on T crossover with P crossunder with T	L	P	TPT		1-5-8-9-10	
Pivot on T crossover with P crossunder with T	L	P	T P T		1-5-8-10-12	

An infinite number of arpeggio patterns are possible. Make up your own!

Chord Substitutions

Chord substitutions can lend an air of sophistication to songs.

Possible substitutes for a Major I chord [1-3-5]

- * minor 6th (vi) [1-3-6]
- * Major 7th (maj7) [1-3-5-7]
- * minor 3rd (iii) [3-5-7]

See the *Practical Music Theory* lesson for info on chord numbers.

Possible substitute for a Dominant 7th chord [1-3-5-b7]

- * Diminished 7th (dim7) [1-b3-b5-6]

ToDo: Using the timing you already know for “Do Re Mi,” play the displayed chord substitutions. How would you characterize their sounds? Better, worse, or just different?

Do Re Mi

Substitute vi for I

L M T	<i>tp</i>	DOE A C
L M T	<i>t m</i>	DEER A Am
L M T	<i>t m</i>	FE-MALE
L M T	<i>m</i>	DEER C

Substitute Imaj7 for I

L M T	<i>tp</i>	Doe a C
L R P T	<i>t m</i>	deer a Cmaj7
L R P T	<i>t m</i>	fe-male
L M T	<i>m</i>	deer

Substitute iii for I

L M T	<i>tp</i>	DOE A C
L M T	<i>t m</i>	DEER A Em
L M T	<i>t m</i>	FE-MALE
L M T	<i>m</i>	DEER C

Substitute Idim7 for I7

L R P T	<i>pm</i>	RAY A G7
L R P T	<i>r</i>	DROP OF Gdim7
L R P T	<i>pm</i>	GOL-DEN
L R P T	<i>r</i>	SUN G7

Play *r* twice

Numerous chord substitutions exist. Search the web for other possibilities.