

Unit 12: Improvising Music

Unit code:	Y/600/6948
QCF Level 3:	BTEC National
Credit value:	10
Guided learning hours:	60

● Aim and purpose

The aim of this unit is to develop the ability of performing musicians to improvise in range of musical contexts.

● Unit introduction

Improvisation is the composition of music in real time. Almost all styles of music feature some form of improvisation. In order to improvise successfully learners must first gain an understanding of the defining elements of improvisation in a range of genres.

It is essential that learners do not feel restricted by technical limitations when improvising in response to musical stimuli. They should therefore develop appropriate techniques as part of their personal practice routine and rehearsal schedule.

Performing improvisation can take place in a solo and group context. Learners should be encouraged to improvise stylistically appropriate contributions in a range of musical situations and genres, as a natural part of their music making.

The emphasis of this unit is on improvisation across a range of musical styles. For learners who wish to focus solely on jazz improvisation the unit *Improvising Music in a Jazz Style* can be offered as an alternative, or can be studied in addition to this unit.

● Learning outcomes

On completion of this unit a learner should:

- 1 Understand the stylistic elements of improvisation across a range of musical genres
- 2 Be able to develop instrumental or vocal techniques appropriate for improvisation in contrasting styles
- 3 Be able to improvise music in response to a stimulus in contrasting styles
- 4 Be able to improvise music responding to other musicians.

Unit content

1 Understand the stylistic elements of improvisation across a range of musical genres

Stylistic elements: musical elements eg rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, tonality, lyricism; sonic trademarks eg distortion of guitar amps, effects, synthesiser sounds, vocal effects

Stylistic interpretation: artistic phrasing and detail; an understanding of appropriate stylistic requirements of the music eg note choice, groove, instrumentation, choice of musical equipment, use of effects, performance attitude

Genres: different musical genres that have specific styles of improvisation eg blues, jazz, R and B, country and western, rock, metal, reggae, funk, soul, classical

2 Be able to develop instrumental or vocal techniques appropriate for improvisation in contrasting styles

Developing: types of rehearsal eg group rehearsal, personal practice, jamming sessions, workshops, master-classes

Techniques: eg working from lead sheets, solo breaks, extemporisation, phrasing, note choice, call and response, groove, instrumentation, choice of equipment

Styles: different musical genres that have specific styles of improvisation eg blues, jazz, R and B, country and western, rock, metal, reggae, funk, soul, classical

3 Be able to improvise music in response to a stimulus in contrasting styles

Stimulus: sheet music eg lead sheet, written part, chord chart, score; aural stimulus eg rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, tonal, lyrical; sonic trademarks

Styles: different musical genres that have specific styles of improvisation eg blues, jazz, R and B, country and western, rock, metal, reggae, funk, soul, classical

4 Be able to improvise music responding to other musicians

Responding to other musicians: communication eg call and response, imitation, interplay, counterpoint; collective musical decisions eg choosing material, choosing key signature, tempo, dynamics, structural decisions

Assessment and grading criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria for a pass grade describe the level of achievement required to pass this unit.

Assessment and grading criteria		
To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:	To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:	To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:
P1 explain the stylistic elements of improvisation across a range of musical genres [IE, RL, SM]	M1 illustrate the stylistic elements of improvisation across a range of musical genres	D1 analyse the fundamental stylistic elements of a wide range of musical genres
P2 develop instrumental or vocal techniques appropriate for improvisation in contrasting styles [CT, RL, SM, EP]	M2 develop instrumental or vocal techniques appropriate for improvisation in contrasting styles competently	D2 develop instrumental or vocal techniques appropriate for improvisation in contrasting styles with confidence and flair
P3 improvise music in response to a stimulus in contrasting styles [CT, RL, TW, SM, EP]	M3 improvise music in response to a stimulus in contrasting styles competently	D3 improvise music in response to a stimulus in contrasting styles with confidence and flair
P4 improvise music responding to other musicians. [CT, TW, SM, RL]	M4 improvise music responding to other musicians competently.	D4 improvise music responding to other musicians with confidence and flair.

PLTS: This summary references where applicable, in the square brackets, the elements of the personal, learning and thinking skills applicable in the pass criteria. It identifies opportunities for learners to demonstrate effective application of the referenced elements of the skills.

Key	IE – independent enquirers	RL – reflective learners	SM – self-managers
	CT – creative thinkers	TW – team workers	EP – effective participators

Essential guidance for tutors

Delivery

The majority of this unit should be delivered through practical opportunities. Learners will need to attend regular rehearsals, jamming sessions and workshops as well as final performances, where appropriate. Tutors will need to guide learners in the formation of ensembles and the selection of appropriate material to ensure the continuous development of technique and musicality. To ensure learners perform material in a range of contexts, tutors must ensure that they are guided as to the opportunities available, for example, a series of performances themed around different genres, preceded by structured rehearsals/workshops and supported by personal practice.

When delivering this unit, tutors will be faced with the task of ensuring that a range of instrumentalists and vocalists can work alongside each other. Tutors are encouraged to provide for their learners a wide range of genre-related examples of improvisation that clearly display defining stylistic characteristics.

Tutors should ensure that learners are exposed to working musicians as much as possible in order to gain an appreciation of the importance of improvisation in all styles of music. Workshops and/or master classes should be provided so that visiting musicians can have a direct influence on the development of this aspect of learners' musicianship.

It is important that the tutor directs learners and focuses their development and performances on key detail, and it would be beneficial to concentrate on stylistic authenticity in every aspect of improvisation. The subject area is potentially so vast that the tutor will need to set parameters and guide learners towards a selection of musical genres. Each learning outcome reflects the importance of this 'range', and this must be carefully controlled with reference to the assessment guidance.

Learners are required to recognise, and therefore gain an understanding of, the key stylistic elements of improvisation in each genre they study. One way of doing this is to listen to examples so learners understand the 'sound' of improvisation in the genre. They can then separate each element of the piece, eg separating rhythmic devices from melodic devices, and from instrumentation and effects, which will allow them to see how the elements combine to make the improvisation recognisable as representative of the genre.

Learners are not obliged to treat the first learning outcome as an entirely theoretical exercise, preceding any practical work. The analysis that learners perform as a natural part of the work they carry out for the second learning outcome could form the basis for the written work required for the first learning outcome.

For the development of appropriate technique, as well as scales, arpeggios and generic exercises, tutors may wish to provide learners with a selection of specific improvisations to recreate as musical studies. This would provide opportunities for learners to work on their technical skills in order to recreate what they hear. This technique and the accompanying knowledge of musical theory can then be applied when improvising in practical workshops or jamming sessions.

Learners are required to improvise in a manner that is stylistically accurate to the genre. This may be achieved by working with either existing or original material. There are several ways in which learners may develop material. For example, they may aurally analyse a piece and then develop stylistically accurate improvisations within a group context. Alternatively, learners may develop original material but again the improvisation should be in the style of the chosen genre. Peer identification and feedback of the material produced would be one way of identifying whether learners have developed something that is stylistically accurate. This process should be supplemented by structured personal practice.

Learners will be required to demonstrate that they have reached a standard where they can contribute improvisations in a performance situation and in a range of musical genres without the need for lengthy rehearsals. It is likely that this takes place towards the end of the course, where learners have developed appropriate skills through personal practice and rehearsals/workshops. Solo performances can be given but it should be noted that group performance is also required to meet all learning outcomes.

Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments.

The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment
Introduction to the programme and structure of the programme of learning.
Understanding the components of improvisation – learning outcome 1 : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying genres • analysing recordings • analysing performances from video • identifying stylistic elements • analysing stylistic interpretation.
Assignment 1: The Elements of Improvisation – P1, M1, D1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners to prepare written work/presentations with tutor facilitation. • Learners to give presentations, if appropriate. • Peer and tutor feedback to be reviewed and actions noted.
Developing techniques for improvisation – learning outcome 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal practice (unguided) – 20 hours • rehearsals (unguided) – 20 hours • rehearsals/workshops (guided) – 10 hours.
Assignment 2: Preparing to Improvise – P2, M2, D2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observed rehearsal/workshops.
Improvising in performance – learning outcome 3 and 4; rehearsal (not assessed) events could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recording sessions • workshops • live events (solo and group performance).
Assignment 3: Improvising in Contrasting Styles; observed events could include – P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording sessions. • Workshops. • Live events (solo and group performance).

Assessment

This unit requires the musician to actually play or sing, and create improvisations in the chosen styles. The use of written work should be minimised. Performance situations can be many and varied but it should be remembered that it is the practical understanding of improvisation and the supporting stylistic detail that is being assessed rather than performance skills, which are examined in other units. Therefore, a technically successful improvisation that bears little relation to the genre of the chosen piece will not achieve the higher grades.

The practical evidence required for this unit will be generated by practice, rehearsal and performances of material from different genres. The assessment could take place continually during classroom activity, workshops, rehearsals, and personal practice, as well as during a public performances or studio-based recording sessions. The practical assignments should be recorded or captured on video to provide both the required evidence and a basis for feedback and discussion with learners.

Learning outcome 1 could be evidenced through a written report, but the nature of evidence required for higher grades suggest that giving a recorded oral presentation using suitable software might be a more appropriate method of assessment. With the development of computer software for this purpose, some centres may be equipped with word processors that support the embedding of audio examples, and learning platforms that support the submission of such documentation. It is up to the course leader to decide the most appropriate option for the learning styles of each cohort. For P1, learners will provide simple unelaborated explanations of the musical elements contributing to the improvisation across a range of appropriate musical genres. NB: To satisfy the requirement for a 'range', learners should be asked to provide evidence for three musical genres. To achieve M1, they will elaborate their explanations with reference to suitable examples. For D1, learners will discuss the relative importance of each example component, and the contribution it makes to the genre from which it is taken. Cross-referencing to other genres could be also used to support their arguments.

Learning outcomes 2 and 3 require learners to illustrate that they know and can perform the fundamental elements of the improvisation in the genres studied, and can reproduce the essence of these in a practical context.

Learning outcome 2 requires learners to take part in workshops or jamming sessions. If a workshop approach is used, this may be led by a visiting musician or the tutor. Whether a workshop or jamming session is used, the following key points must be addressed for assessment purposes:

- the session must be captured on video
- each learner must have the opportunity to improvise.

This should be supported by formalised personal practice, for which a practice diary should be kept. This can be a traditional written diary, or could be a log of dated audio recordings.

To achieve P2 the evidence will show that learners have developed stylistically appropriate techniques for improvisation over the course of time through personal practice and participation on workshops/rehearsals. The use of the word 'contrasting' in the learning outcome/grading criteria implies that a minimum of **two** contrasting styles should be developed. Merit level learners will be tracking and discussing their progress, and reviewing targets as part of this process. Their contributions to rehearsals/workshops will be clearly recognisable as examples of the chosen genres. Distinction level learners will contribute to the workshop or jamming session in a way that is not only stylistically accurate but also shows musical flair. Their contribution will show they have understood the finer performance details of improvisation in the chosen genres.

To meet learning outcome 3, learners will demonstrate that they can improvise in a performance situation, given the stimulus appropriate to the chosen style (for example – graphic score, lead sheet, a motif played by another band member, and so on). Capturing on video is the most effective way to evidence this outcome

These situations could include studio-based recording sessions and live performances. Where the learning outcome refers to 'contrasting styles' this should be taken as a minimum of **two**. To achieve P3 the evidence will show that learners have contributed improvisations to each performance situation in a way that did not detract from the overall effect. Evidence for M3 will show that their contributions are clearly recognisable as examples of the chosen genre, demonstrating appropriate 'substance' (duration and musical content). To achieve D3, learners will have a mastery of appropriate musical skills to a degree where they can contribute to each performance with creativity and flair.

It is likely (but not essential) that learning outcome 4 will be met in the same performance situation(s) as learning outcome 3, and they are easily combined into a single assignment. To meet learning outcome 4 the evidence will show that the learner is interacting with other musicians, and so it would be possible to separate the two learning outcomes by setting up separate solo and group improvisation performance opportunities. To achieve P4 the learner will be responding to other musicians while improvising in a way that does not detract from the performance. An improvisation that evidences clear communication with other musicians in a way that is beneficial to the performance will achieve M4. To achieve D4 the improvisation will demonstrate imagination, flair and creativity that could only take place with the highest level of communication between musicians.

Programme of suggested assignments

The following table shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass, merit and distinction criteria in the grading grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Edexcel assignments to meet local needs and resources.

Criteria covered	Assignment title	Scenario	Assessment method
P1, M1, D1	The Elements of Improvisation	Analyse improvisations from a range of musical genres (minimum three) identifying musical elements and interpretive devices that define each style.	Written piece or – individual presentation to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> audio examples.
P2, M2, D2	Preparing to Improvise	Personal practice and group rehearsals are required to prepare for performance (see P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4 below).	Evidence to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> practice diary (could be written/audio) video evidence of rehearsal tutor observation reports.
P3, M3, D3 P4, M4, D4	Improvising in Contrasting Styles	Participate in one or more performances in which they will improvise in contrasting (at least two) styles. Alternatively, this assignment could be split into a solo performance (P3, M3, D3) and a group performance (P4, M4, D4).	Evidence to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> video evidence of performance tutor observation reports.

Links to National Occupational Standards, other BTEC units, other BTEC qualifications and other relevant units and qualifications

This unit forms part of the BTEC Music and Music Technology sector suite. This unit has particular links with the following unit titles in the BTEC Music and Music Technology suite:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
	Exploring Musical Improvisation	Music Performance Techniques
	Solo Musical Performance	Pop Music in Practice
	Developing as a Musical Performer	Working and Developing as a Musical Ensemble
		Live Music Workshop
		Improvising Music in a Jazz Style
		Solo Performance Skills

Essential resources

Learners will need access to adequate practice and rehearsal facilities, with instruments and equipment of suitable quality, where the learners themselves do not supply these. Opportunities for workshops and/or master classes will need to be provided with a reasonable timescale that fits the delivery of the unit. An appropriate range of workshops/master classes and jamming/rehearsal opportunities will need to be provided to cater for the needs and interests of the whole group. Where facilities do not exist within the institution to offer a range of performance situations, arrangements will need to be made with external organisations such as theatres and recording studios in order to provide a suitable range of performance situations.

Classroom resources that allow the viewing of video material, and monitoring of audio examples, together with suitable word-processing or presentation software will also be needed. Access to a wide range of historically and culturally important music (as audio and video resources) will be needed to support this part of the unit.

Indicative reading for learners

Textbooks

Frisell B, Damian J and Feist J – *The Guitarist's Guide to Composing and Improvising* (Berkley Press, 2001) ISBN 978-0634016356

Mehegan A – *Improvising Jazz Piano* (Hal Leonard, 2001) ISBN 978-0825619137

Norton C – *The Easiest Way to Improvise* (Boosey and Hawkes, 2005) ISBN 979-0060115943

Richards T – *Improvising Blues Piano: The Basic Principles of Blues Piano Explained for the Intermediate-level Pianist in an Easy-to-grasp Fashion* (Schott, 1997) ISBN 978-0946535972

Satin K and Clark C – *Creative Saxophone Improvising (book + CD): An introduction to improvising jazz, blues, Latin, & funk for the intermediate player* (OUP, 2005) ISBN 978-0193223684

Skinner T – *Improvising Lead Guitar (Series)* (Registry Publications, 2000) ISBN 978-1898466376

Slonimsky N – *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (Music Sales, 1999) ISBN 978-0825614491

Wheatcroft J and Hay A – *Improvising Blues Guitar: An Introduction to Blues Guitar Styles, Techniques and Improvisation (The Schott Pro Styles Series)* (Schott, 2007) ISBN 978-1902455914

Delivery of personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS)

The table below identifies the opportunities for personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that have been included within the pass assessment criteria of this unit.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	analysing improvisations in various styles
Creative thinkers	improvising in rehearsal and performance
Reflective learners	monitoring their own progress when practising
Team workers	rehearsing with others
Self-managers	organising a personal practice routine
Effective participators	rehearsing with others.

Although PLTS are identified within this unit as an inherent part of the assessment criteria, there are further opportunities to develop a range of PLTS through various approaches to teaching and learning.

Skill	When learners are ...
Independent enquirers	researching different styles of improvisation
Creative thinkers	developing practice routines for improvisation
Reflective learners	responding to feedback from instrumental tutors
Team workers	planning performance repertoire
Self-managers	organising rehearsals
Effective participators	playing in a recording session.

● Functional Skills – Level 2

Skill	When learners are ...
ICT – Find and select information	
Select and use a variety of sources of information independently for a complex task	preparing written piece/presentation
Access, search for, select and use ICT-based information and evaluate its fitness for purpose	preparing written piece/presentation
ICT – Develop, present and communicate information	
Enter, develop and format information independently to suit its meaning and purpose including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • text and tables • images • numbers • records 	preparing written piece/presentation
Bring together information to suit content and purpose	preparing written piece/presentation
Present information in ways that are fit for purpose and audience	preparing written piece/presentation
Evaluate the selection and use of ICT tools and facilities used to present information	preparing written piece/presentation
Select and use ICT to communicate and exchange information safely, responsibly and effectively including storage of messages and contact lists	preparing written piece/presentation
English	
Speaking and listening – make a range of contributions to discussions and make effective presentations in a wide range of contexts	taking and active role in discussions at rehearsals
Writing – write documents, including extended writing pieces, communicating information, ideas and opinions, effectively and persuasively	preparing written piece.