

Sabbatical Final Report  
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During the 2013-14 academic year, I was awarded a sabbatical leave to develop a unique approach to classical music improvisation. After immersing myself in this subject for over a year, I agree even more with Washington University music education researcher R. Keith Sawyer, who says, “Musicians educated with improvisation at the center will have a better developed ability to think musically — to deeply understand music as well as be better prepared to interpret written scores.” I am grateful to have been awarded a sabbatical leave to research this fascinating, cutting-edge subject area and I am highly motivated to continue practicing and teaching classical improvisation at WMU.

As I discussed in my sabbatical proposal, improvisation is a skill highly valued among many non-jazz teachers and performers and the major music-accrediting agencies (e.g., National Association of Schools of Music), but it is rarely formally taught to classical musicians in traditional music degree programs. This is a significant problem. While students are learning the basics of music and mastery of their instrument, they are not given the opportunity to creatively synthesize these skills into spontaneous performance. This leads to the development of incomplete musicians who are overly-reliant on notated music, crippled by the unrealistic performance expectations that have been created by studio recordings, and starved by a culture in classical music that prizes perfect reproduction above creative expression in musical performance.

The new course that I am offering this semester (fall 2014) is part of the solution of developing more whole musicians at WMU. I created a course that directly reflects what I learned during the sabbatical leave (see syllabus below). Each day during the leave, I explored classical improvisation through books, videos, recordings, websites, blogs, interactions with other musicians, and personal practice. A list of specific activities that I pursued may be found below. Please also see the bibliography below for a complete list of the published resources that I explored and found most valuable to this research.

In the sabbatical leave application letter from Provost Green, he says, “Sabbatical leaves are established and encouraged to promote the professional growth and development of the faculty.” It is undeniable that I have grown professionally and developed creatively over the past year. The success of this leave is already evident in my recent professional activity: a 50-minute, completely improvised performance with three colleagues at the International Society for Improvised Music in New York City (June 7, 2014), two three-hour sessions on classical improvisation taught for MUS 5950: Music Education Workshop (for music education graduate students) June 23-24, 2014, and ten 50-minute sessions on classical improvisation taught at SEMINAR (WMU School of Music’s high school summer music camp) July 14-25, 2014. These experiences far exceeded what I thought I would be able to do as a

beginning classical improviser and I could not have anticipated these opportunities when I applied for the sabbatical leave in September 2012.

These experiences are important and have been very inspiring and rejuvenating for me as a teacher and performer. But perhaps the more important lesson that I learned through the sabbatical leave is what it feels like to be a student and a beginner again. Through ten years of formal music training and then ten years of teaching at WMU, I have been molded and shaped to be an expert in my field. I have always considered myself a “perpetual learner,” but at the same time I felt I needed to appear always in control with all of the answers. Of course being an expert is valuable and has a great benefit for our students. But I was beginning to lose a deep connection with the experiences and feelings that I know many of my students’ experience, such as vulnerability, fear, uncertainty, self-doubt, and insecurity. I had these feelings as a junior faculty member, but, again, I was supposed to be in control with all the answers, so I tried to deny and ignore those feelings. During the past year I took several classes and participated in several workshops where my being a university professor and professional musician was not known or did not have much clout. This tested my ego, which was incredibly refreshing for me! I learned in a deep way that I am more than my job title and I have so much more to offer students beyond my expertise. I know that WMU and the School of Music will benefit from this time of profound self-reflection and self-growth for me.

I would also like to say that I think more faculty members should be encouraged to take a sabbatical leave. It is vital for the health of each department. In my area I heard numerous times as a point of pride that some of my colleagues have been at the university 20, 30, even 40 years and never “needed” a sabbatical. I hope to help change that culture upon my return.

I am even more confident now that our unique offerings on classical music improvisation will distinguish the School, the College, and the University in addition to distinguishing my career in a new, cutting-edge field of research and recognition. Thank you for this productive, profound sabbatical leave.

### **Specific Activities & Accomplishments**

(classes, concerts, workshops, conferences pertinent to research on improvisation)

September 24, 2013 – March 4, 2014—participated in the International Percussion Ensemble at Kalamazoo College. Performed (and improvised) on djembe. Weekly rehearsals and presented public performances at Kalamazoo College on November 19 and March 4.

October 6—observed Hildegard of Bingen one-woman dramatic re-enactment, written and performed by Linn Maxwell.

October 8, 2013—observed pianist Helen Lukan accompany and improvise a non-major ballet class at WMU (taught by David Curwen).

October 9, 2013—participated in Music, Mind, and Medicine: Creativity and Consciousness in Clinical Care conference, co-hosted by the WMU School of Music.

October 9, 2013—improvisation rehearsal with WMU music students.

October 16, 2013— improvisation rehearsal with WMU music students.

October 20, 2013—Interplay (improvisational movement) class with Margaret Bruder at the Sangha Yoga studio in downtown Kalamazoo.

October 27-30, 2013—observed several classes at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA:

- taught by horn professor and improvisation specialist Jeffrey Agrell
  - Weird Music for freshman non-majors
  - Creativity in Music for non-major (observed three labs and one lecture)
  - I also met one-on-one with Professor Agrell several times both to improvise and discuss improvising and improvised with one of his private students.
- taught by music education professor and Interplay specialist Mary Cohen
  - Songwriting for non-majors
  - I also had the chance to meet with Dr. Cohen over coffee to discuss improvisation.

November 8-10, 2013—participated in Music for People improvisational music workshop in Stony Point, NY.

November 13, 2013—observed Samite performance at the Kalamazoo Public Library. Samite is a professional kalimba/vocal/improvisation artist from Uganda.

November 14, 2013— improvisation rehearsal with WMU music students.

November 21, 2013— improvisation rehearsal with WMU music students.

November 22, 2013—observed Ed Roth's WMU music therapy class (MUS 4730 (Music Therapy Practicum II), which incorporates improvisation.

November 22, 2013—performed with the Western Improv Orchestra (student ensemble) at Henderson Castle in Kalamazoo.

December 3, 2013—observed classes taught by improvisation specialist Edward Sarath at the University of Michigan:

- Integral Basic Musicianship
- Contemporary Improvisation
- Improvisational Forms

December 31, 2013-January 3, 2014—improvised in Tempe, AZ with Arizona State University tuba professor Deanna Swoboda. Also toured the international Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, AZ.

January 23, 2014—improvisation rehearsal with WMU alum Jonathan Chapman Cook.

February 14-16, 2014—participated in Music for People improvisational music workshop in Frazer, PA.

February 21, 2014—observed improvisation class at SUNY-Fredonia in Fredonia, NY.

March 3, 2014—improvisation rehearsal with WMU alum Dani Reynolds.

March 5-6, 2014—observed several classes at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA:

- taught by horn professor and improvisation specialist Jeffrey Agrell
  - Improvisation Ensemble concerts (on campus and at local coffee house—I participated in both)
  - I also met one-on-one with Professor Agrell several times both to improvise and discuss improvising.

March 11-April 29, 2014—participated in 8-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction class in Kalamazoo.

March 13, 2014—observed “Classical Improvisation for Classical Musicians” masterclass by pianists John Andrew Sliminski and Gilad Rabinovitch at WMU.

April 4, 2014—met with WMU emeritus Robert Whaley to discuss the class he taught on historical music improvisation in the 1980s and 1990s.

April 12, 2014—observed Imani Winds concert (which incorporated improvisation).

May 16, 2014— improvisation rehearsal with WMU grad student Liz Glasser.

May 21, 2014— improvisation rehearsal with WMU grad student Liz Glasser.

May 28, 2014— improvisation rehearsal with WMU grad student Liz Glasser.

May 30-June 2, 2014—six intensive improvisation rehearsals with the Momentary Quartet in Princeton, NJ.

June 5-8, 2014—performed a completely improvised 50-session with the Momentary Quartet at the International Society for Improvised Music Conference in New York City.

June 17, 2014—performed a solo improvisation with looper pedal and an improvisation duet with Jeffrey Agrell at the Kendall Betts Horn Camp in Lyman, NH. Also taught improvisation.

June 23-24, 2014—taught improvisation in two 3-hour sessions for MUS 5950: Music Education Workshop (for music education graduate students).

July 13-25, 2014—taught improvisation in ten 50-minute sessions at SEMINAR, WMU's high school summer music camp.

July 29-30, 2014—performed and participated in several improvised sessions at Music for People's "Adventures in Improvisation" workshop at SUNY-Fredonia in Fredonia, NY.

August 2, 2014—performed and participated in several improvised movement sessions at an InterPlay Intensive Weekend (led by Mary and Matt Cohen) at Prairiewoods retreat center in Hiawatha, IA.

### **Financial Support**

I received two awards from WMU that were invaluable in helping me learn and teach classical improvisation and participate in the activities listed above. I received an Instructional Development Grant (\$4,999) to conduct site visits to schools to examine specific instructional improvement approaches, purchase basic percussion instruments to use in improvisation classes that I will teach starting in fall 2014 (MUS2650/5970: Improvisation for Classical Musicians), and purchase research resources (books and recordings) relevant to this topic. I received a Support for Faculty Scholars Award (\$1,999) to work with and observe classes taught by three classical music (non-jazz) improvisation specialists during the 2013-14 academic year: Jeffrey Agrell at The University of Iowa; David Rudge at SUNY Fredonia; and Jim Oshinsky at the Music for People workshop in Frazer, PA. The workshop in Pennsylvania was particularly fruitful, as connections made there led to the conference presentation invitation in New York City. These grants were critical to my success in attaining the objective of learning how to play and teach classical music improvisation.

### **Changes from Original Sabbatical Proposal**

The list of sabbatical activities includes several workshops, classroom observations, and events that I could not have anticipated in the original proposal. However, one of the biggest disappointments for me last year was the discontinuation of Deep Listening Intensive workshops. These workshops simply were not offered last year. I decided to postpone my observation of jazz improvisation classes because of their high specialization in jazz musical language. Due to time and budget restraints (and

because the more I learned about classical improvisation, I felt other experiences would be more valuable to this work), I didn't work with Jeff Snedeker at Central Washington University or Lydia Busler-Blais in Vermont. I had a nice long phone conversation with Eric Edberg at DePauw University and I anticipate we will be able to collaborate in the coming academic year. But, again, time restraints prevented me from traveling to Greencastle, IN to observe his class. I believe my research and professional activity during the sabbatical leave far exceeded what I outlined in the original proposal.

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Ken Robinson on How Schools Kill Creativity

[http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity)

Stuart Brown on the Importance of Play

[www.ted.com/talks/stuart\\_brown\\_says\\_play\\_is\\_more\\_than\\_fun\\_it\\_s\\_vital.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital.html)

Brené Brown on the Power of Vulnerability

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzLF7o>

<http://improvinsights.com>

The most comprehensive blog/website on classical improvisation. Lots of great links. Created by hornist Jeff Agrell.

The music of these musicians was also important for this research (in no particular order): Hilary Hahn (*Silfra* album), Richard Stoltzman and NEXUS (*Garden of Sounds* album), David Darling, Jen Baker, Paul Horn and NEXUS album, Music for People, Hang Massive, Kristin Norderval, Layne Redmond, Pauline Oliveros, Meredith Monk, Jeffrey Agrell, Arkady Shilkloper, Alex Theory, Brian Eno, Eric Satie, Michael Nyman, Bob Dylan, Blue Dahlia, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Kronos Quartet, Ravi Shankar, Counting Crows, Jonsi, Sigur Ros, Adele, Dave Matthews Band, Jane Buttars, Zoe Keating, Modest Mouse, The Cranberries, Diana Krall, Samite, Divina Infusino, Jai Uttal and Ben Leinbach, John de Kadt, Christopher of Wolves, Erica Azim, Dumisani Maraire, Glen, Velez, Uakti, The Cure, Depeche Mode, Madonna, Queen, Imogen Heap, U2, Abigail Washburn, Arcade Fire, Beatles, Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, Béla Fleck with Zakir Hussein & Edgar Meyer, Elvis, Explosions in the Sky, Mumford & Sons, Neko Case, Nirvana, Patsy Cline, Radiohead, Regina Spektor, REM, Tracy Chapman, TuneYards, Esbjorn Svensson Trio, Terry Riley, Dixon's Violin, Eric Edberg, Carolyn Koebel, Bobby McFerrin, Silvia Nakkach, FreeK, Murmuration, Rova Sax Quartet, Chris Biggs, Lisa Coons.

# **Improvisation for Classical Musicians**

## **MUS 2650 (Aural Skills IV) / MUS 5970 • Fall 2014**

Mondays/Wednesdays 9-9:50 pm • Room 1209 • 1 credit

Western Michigan University • School of Music

Dr. Lin Foulk • lin.foulk@wmich.edu • 269-387-4692 • office hours TBA

*A creature that plays is more readily adaptable to changing contexts and conditions. Play as improvisation sharpens our capacity to deal with a changing world.—Stephen Nachmanovitch in Free Play*

### **Course Description**

Classical musicians are trained to learn music from a written score in a very particular way so as to realize and reproduce a composer's musical creation. This can lead to beautiful music but it can also lead to excessive care and preparation on the part of the performer, causing musical timidity and reticence and stunting creativity. In this course you will learn to play without notated music in a safe, supportive musical environment. In addition to improvising using your major instrument, you will also sing and play basic percussion instruments. We will start with highly structured improvisational projects and assignments, so that improvising is not overwhelming at first. As the class progresses the assignments will be freer with fewer fixed parameters. Students in the class will be called the Kalamazoo Musical Improv Group (KMIG), which will perform on campus and maybe in the community.

### **Course Goals**

- Develop confidence and courage to perform without notated music.
- Gain a practical and philosophical understanding of the benefits of improvising for classically-trained musicians.
- Practice teaching improvisation by leading students through improvisation activities.

### **Learning Outcomes**

*In this course you will learn to:*

- spontaneously create music
- develop and open up creatively with your major instrument
- improve ear training and listening skills by aurally recognizing basic types of scales, chords, forms, and melodies and playing these back by memory through improvisation
- improve rhythm and improvise using varied rhythms and meters
- invent rhythmic and melodic musical ideas
- develop, ornament, and elaborate upon melodies and motifs
- develop technique on your major instrument, using improvisation to enhance the study of instrumental or vocal technique.
- improve general musicianship



- build on musical skills that you already have
- incorporate a practical, active application of music theory and aural skills
- develop a unique musical voice
- improve confidence in performing
- improve memorization skills
- work in a solo as well as an accompanimental role
- explore different timbres and extended techniques on your major instrument
- teach and lead improvisation activities
- develop musical imagination and inner ear
- reinvigorate passion and love of music and enhance practicing
- have fun

### **Course Expectations**

You are expected to attend the class sessions with your instrument (please be on time), participate in class activities (both individually and within the group), and complete listening, reading, and practice assignments outside of class. A detailed schedule is listed below. Every student will perform improvisations in the final concert (January 21, 2015 Convocation recital). Regular attendance is critical for your success in this class. If you must miss a class, let Dr. Foulk know at least 24 hours in advance, or you will receive an unexcused absence for the day. Three unexcused absences will result in an incomplete grade for the course.

### **Required Course Materials**

1. Textbook: *Free Play*, by Stephen Nachmanovitch
2. 2 single-subject notebooks –or– 2 three-ring binders to keep all printed assignments together and in order
3. Portable sound recording device
4. Staff paper

### **Recommended Course Material**

*Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*, by Jeffrey Agrell

### **Grading**

60%	Assignments and Exams
30%	Attitude, Attendance, Participation, Proficiency
10%	Final Performance

### **Assignments**

All assignments are taken from the required textbook (see above), materials on reserve at the Harper C. Maybee Music and Dance Library, or the class webpage:

[www.linfolk.org](http://www.linfolk.org) (click on “improvisation” username: wmuimprov password: iluvimprov)

## Logbook

All assignments will be kept chronologically in two single-subject notebooks or two three-ring binders (you will turn one notebook/binder into Dr. Foulk every week). For *Reading/Viewing Assignments*, read the book chapter or article or watch the video listed for each class week. Turn in a one-page (per week) printed or hand-written response, leaving room in the margins for Dr. Foulk's comments. Questions or prompts for your responses will sometimes be sent by Dr. Foulk in advance by email (please check your "wmich" email account often). For *Listening Assignments*, explore a couple of links for each category and describe the performance and your reaction to it in five sentences. Let Dr. Foulk know if you discover other artists to add to this list. A list of musicians (and links) may be found here: [www.linfolk.org](http://www.linfolk.org) (click on "improvisation" then click on "musicians"). For *Practice Assignments*, please write briefly (5-10 sentences) about what you learned in both your solo practice and your duet practice in your logbook each week. All assignments are due to Dr. Foulk during the class meeting each Monday.

## Reading/Viewing Assignments

### Due week of:

- Sept. 8 **Nachmanovitch** "Introduction" (pgs. 4-13)  
**Agrell** *Improvisation...* "Introduction: Why Improvise?" (pgs. 1-3, on reserve)
- 15 **Nachmanovitch** "Practice" (pgs. 66-77)  
**Brockmann** "Improvise, what for?" (pgs. 1-14, on reserve)
- 22 **Nachmanovitch** "The Power of Mistakes" & "Playing Together" (pgs. 88-101)  
**Kanack** "Dealing with Fear and Ego" (pdf)  
**Dub FX** Beat Boxing basics (video, 5:10)
- 29 **Nachmanovitch** "Quality" & "Art for Life's Sake" (pgs. 170-190)
- Oct. 6 **Catmull** *Creativity, Inc.* (pdf)
- 13 **Rumi** "Two Kinds of Intelligence" (pdf)  
**Robinson** "How Schools Kill Creativity" (video, 19:25)
- 20 **Agrell** *Improvisation...* "Musical Training for Improvisation" & "Introduction to the Games" (pgs. 30-32 & 41-44, on reserve)  
**Wigram** *Improvisation* "Foreword" (pdf)
- 27 benefits of improv (**Stevens, Goodman, Olson**) (3 pdf files)  
**Brown** "The Importance of Play" (video, 22:26)  
**Baikal ice drumming** (video, 4:27)  
**IKEA Kitchen rhythms** (video, 1:43)  
**Vienna Vegetable Orchestra** (video, 5:56)  
**Junk Music** (link)
- Nov. 3 **Best** "Music Curricula in the Future" (pdf)  
**Small** "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space" (link)  
**Thomas** Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program Synthesis (pdf)
- 10 **Godin** *The Icarus Deception* (pdf)  
**Godin** *Linchpin* (pdf)

		<b>Cahn</b> “Questions, Questions, Questions!” (pdf)
		<b>Patton</b> “Lifemusic: Putting the hum into human!” (video, 16:02)
		<b>Patton</b> “Lifemusic” (video, 7:44)
	17	<b>Brown</b> “The Power of Vulnerability” (video, 20:16)
		<b>Hill</b> “Improvise Intentionally” (link)
	24	<b>Sarath</b> “The Music School of the Future” (pdf)
Dec.	1	<b>Agrell</b> <i>Improvisation...</i> “Improvisation Principles” & “Constructing Improvisation Compositions” (pgs. 271-272 & 278-280, on reserve)
	8	Final—lead new students in improvising
Jan	21	Convocation presentation

### Listening Assignments

#### Due week of:

Sept.	8	mixed ensemble
	15	mixed ensemble
	22	string quartet
	29	voice
Oct.	6	percussion
	13	piano
	20	cello & double bass
	27	viola & harp
Nov.	3	violin
	10	trumpet, trombone, & tuba
	17	horn
	24	flute & clarinet
Dec.	1	oboe, saxophone, & bassoon
	8	(Finals week)

### Practice Assignments

Expect to practice improvisation on your own on your major instrument for at least 30 minutes each day. Start by practicing suggestions outlined in Dr. Foulk’s handout called “Improvisation Basics” on the “Links & Resources” page on the class website (see above). Other activities to practice include those learned in class as well as Jeff Agrell’s books on reserve in the library. Each week you are expected to meet with another person from the class to practice improvisation together for at least 30 minutes. Please work with a new person each week.

### University Policies

**Accommodation for disabilities** Students with a documented disability (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.) who need to arrange reasonable accommodations must contact Disability Services for Students at the beginning of the semester. A disability determination must be made by this office before any accommodations are provided by the instructor. For more information, see <http://www.wmich.edu/disabilityservices/index.html>. **Student academic conduct** You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the University policies and procedures that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple

*submission, plagiarism, complicity and computer misuse. (The academic policies addressing Student Rights and Responsibilities can be found in the Undergraduate and Graduate Catalogs at [www.wmich.edu](http://www.wmich.edu)*

***Classes Missed Due to Religious Observances:*** *students who must be absent from scheduled classes to fulfill religious obligations or observe practices associated with their faith will not be disadvantaged. However, it is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with his/her instructors in advance. It is in the student's best interests to approach each instructor expeditiously and with sufficient notice so that the rights and responsibilities of the instructor are not disrupted.*

This syllabus is subject to (and will likely) change.