

MUS 2650/5970 Improvisation for Classical Musicians  
Fall 2014 • Dr. Lin Foulk, instructor  
Summary Report

---

### **Class Summary**

Thirteen students enrolled in diverse programs within the School of Music (BM in performance, education, therapy; MM in performance and conducting; MA in music) took this unique course offering. Through both large and small ensembles using their major instrument, voice, body percussion, or basic percussion instruments, students learned basic techniques for playing without notated music in a highly accessible, encouraging, and fun classroom environment. Students in the class practiced improvising using activities that I discovered during my sabbatical leave in 2013-14. The class also had the privilege of working with top artists in the field of classical music improvisation (see list below). All four guests noted the impressive willingness and ability of these students to participate fully in the activities that they presented. Based on the feedback below, this class seems to fill a pedagogical need within the School that is not offered in other classes. I am happy to offer it again in the future.

### **Guest artists**

- **Jeffrey Agrell**, author of *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* and professor at the University of Iowa
- **Eugene Friesen**, author of *Improvisation for Classical Musicians*, member of Trio Globo, and professor at Berklee College of Music
- **Vanessa Vo**, Vietnamese traditional instrument performer and composer
- **Tawyna Smith**, author of PhD dissertation *Using the Expressive Arts to Facilitate Group Music Improvisation and Individual Reflection: Expanding Consciousness in Music Learning for Self-Development*

### **Selected feedback from course evaluations**

- "This was a fantastic experience."
- "The way we were eased into improv made it very user-friendly."
- "I felt like I was able to transcend to a new level of listening this semester."
- "I could see a lot of what I learned in this class being applicable when I'm a music teacher someday."
- "This class helped me learn how to fully express myself."
- "I was nervous going into this class, but that quickly dissolved."
- "I had only positive, growing experiences. And they're all unlike any other musical experiences I've had."
- "Improvisation allows me to play and just play for me. I like the freedom and challenges that are present when improvising."
- "I expected this class to be so much scarier. Thanks for relaxing it."
- "This class gave me the opportunity to explore new genres that I would not normally play on my instrument."
- "By far this is the best class I've taken in the School of Music! Please offer it again!"

***Syllabus***  
**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  | <b>Nachmanovitch</b> "Introduction" (pgs. 4-13)<br><b>Agrell</b> <i>Improvisation...</i> "Introduction: Why Improvise?" (pgs. 1-3, on reserve)  |
|       | 15 | <b>Nachmanovitch</b> "Practice" (pgs. 66-77)<br><b>Brockmann</b> "Improvise, what for?" (pgs. 1-14, on reserve)   |
|       | 22 | <b>Nachmanovitch</b> "The Power of Mistakes" & "Playing Together" (pgs. 88-101)<br><b>Kanack</b> "Dealing with Fear and Ego"(pdf)<br><b>Dub FX</b> Beat Boxing basics (video, 5:10)   |
|       | 29 | <b>Nachmanovitch</b> "Quality" & "Art for Life's Sake" (pgs. 170-190)   |
| Oct.  | 6  | <b>Catmull</b> <i>Creativity, Inc.</i> (pdf)  |
|       | 13 | <b>Rumi</b> "Two Kinds of Intelligence" (pdf)<br><b>Robinson</b> "How Schools Kill Creativity" (video, 19:25)   |
|       | 20 | <b>Agrell</b> <i>Improvisation...</i> "Musical Training for Improvisation" & "Introduction to the Games" (pgs. 30-32 & 41-44, on reserve)<br><b>Wigram</b> <i>Improvisation</i> "Foreword" (pdf)  |
|       | 27 | benefits of improv ( <b>Stevens, Goodman, Olson</b> ) (3 pdf files)<br><b>Brown</b> "The Importance of Play" (video, 22:26)<br><b>Baikal ice drumming</b> (video, 4:27)<br><b>IKEA Kitchen rhythms</b> (video, 1:43)<br><b>Vienna Vegetable Orchestra</b> (video, 5:56)<br><b>Junk Music</b> (link) |
| Nov.  | 3  | <b>Best</b> "Music Curricula in the Future" (pdf)<br><b>Small</b> "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space" (link)<br><b>Thomas</b> Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program Synthesis (pdf)   |
|       | 10 | <b>Godin</b> <i>The Icarus Deception</i> (pdf)<br><b>Godin</b> <i>Linchpin</i> (pdf)<br><b>Cahn</b> "Questions, Questions, Questions!" (pdf)<br><b>Patton</b> "Lifemusic: Putting the hum into human!" (video, 16:02)<br><b>Patton</b> "Lifemusic" (video, 7:44)                                    |
|       | 17 | <b>Brown</b> "The Power of Vulnerability" (video, 20:16)<br><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.