Notes on Incorporating Improvisation into the String Orchestra Curriculum

Ben Roberts (2011)

In recent years, the alternative styles genre has become a greater part of the middle and high school string orchestra repertoire.[1] The number of pieces within this category is broad, and is most easily defined as anything outside the classical Western tradition. However, even within the alternative styles literature, there remains a limited amount of material that allows for improvisation in a string orchestra setting. This paper discusses some techniques the author has used to incorporate improvisation into the string orchestra curriculum.

The ability to improvise is included in curriculum standards at both the national and state levels. The National Standards for Arts Education state that students in grades 5-8 should be able to "improvise melodic embellishments and simple rhythmic and melodic variations" as well "improvise short melodies."[2] Students in grades 9-12 should be able to "improvise rhythmic and melodic variations on given pentatonic melodies and melodies in major and minor keys" and "improvise original melodies over given chord progressions."[3] Improvisation is listed in the curriculum standards at the high school level for the states of New York, California and Texas. At the middle school level improvisation is explicitly mentioned in the standards for New York[4] and California[5] while for Texas, "students are expected to create simple melodies,"[6] a part of composition that certainly includes improvisation.

Improvisation as a creative process is a way to captivate students and open up an aspect of their intellectual development that may not be fully engaged within the traditional orchestral instructional model. It would seem likely to encourage retention and

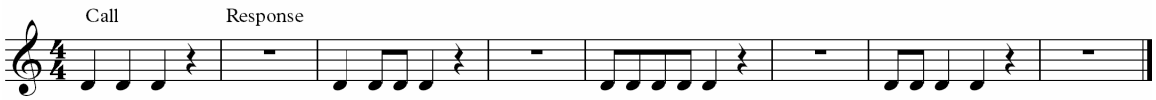
attract new students, as it incorporates new music and a different creative process into the curriculum. It helps develop the type of creative ability in the domain of music that is routinely used in language -- for in language, "every new sentence a person utters is a brand-new combination of words, appearing for the first time in the history of the universe."[7] Once students gain access into this insight, the teacher should be able to foster within them the confidence and strategies necessary to develop a similar ability in the language of music. In a world in which the development of computers has led to the automation of larger arenas of human activity, the development of creativity in as many domains as possible is a necessity.

Turning to the practical aspects of teaching improvisation, the author will reflect upon about a decade of experience in both public and private settings, representing students of a wide range of income and social classes.

Beginning strings instruction within a school orchestra setting typically starts between the 4th and 6th grades. The class will often cover material in an introductory method book, such as *Essential Elements*, and during the first semester will learn such songs as "Mozart Melody (Twinkle, Twinkle)," "Jingle Bells," and "Ode to Joy." If the class meets less routinely, progress may be slower, though the process will be similar. Even at this level of ability, it is possible to introduce aspects of improvisation with the introduction of the call and response method. The teacher can start by demonstrating a one-measure rhythm using only a single note. The students can then be asked to play it back imitatively as group, with a beat in the background to keep time.

Some examples:

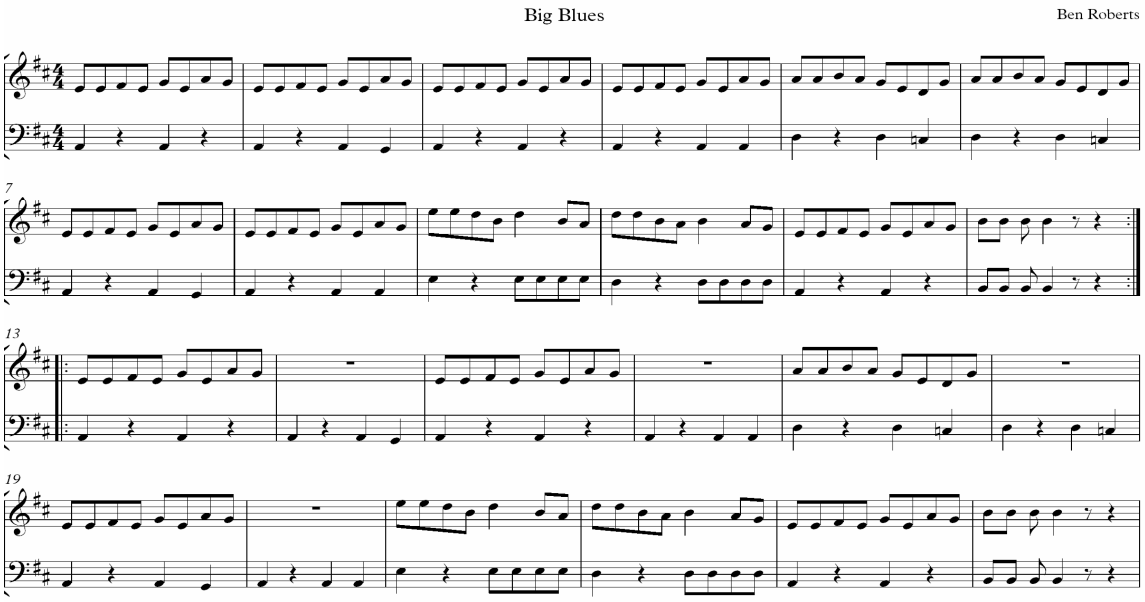
(Fig. 1.1)



Experience has shown that it is most utilitarian to leave the fourth beat of the call rhythm as a rest, to better prep the entrance of the students into the response measure. Quite frequently students will respond favorably to a beat or rhythm to play along with. Note that many beginning band programs utilize a metronome at the early stages of instruction, and even if this is not common in strings, it may be something to consider. A metronome can be augmented by a drum machine, if available and practical. Once the students are comfortable with the idea of call and response over a one- or two-measure time period, they can be asked to make up a response in a similar vein. Here the teacher will likely find a number of volunteers, as beginning players are usually less inhibited about this practice of creativity than are more experienced players who have never improvised. While a number of students will make up rhythms that don't quite fit within the context of the exercise, generally there will be a few who do. The teacher can repeat these as a way of modeling while congratulating all the students on their attempts at achievement.

This exercise can be utilized over a number of classes and then dovetailed into a piece previously written, or one the teacher creates, where a similar method can be applied. The use of the Blues style can be useful in this context, as the Blues traditionally has a call and response format to it, as well as a 12 or 16 bar refrain of similar length to

other pieces the beginning student is playing. The piece can be used as way to touch aspects of music history that are within national and state music standards as well. An example composed by the author and used with success previously, is as follows: (Fig 2.1)

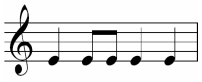


Students first learn the song as a standard piece (measures 1-12), often with some type of drum beat or "rocking" piano part accompanying. This generally gets the students excited, especially those who may not have heard strings in this context before. The ideas from the call and response exercise can be incorporated into measures 13-24, with one-note rhythmic figures being traded off during the rest sections (measure 14, 16 etc.). Instruction is crucial here, for the teacher must shape the nature of the improvisation so that students understand what fits and what doesn't. They should give the students possible notes to choose from for their one-note rhythmic pattern. For "Big Blues" an A, D, or E is usually recommended. Successful student examples can be highlighted, along with a limited number from the teacher. In practice, if this exercise is done in a fun and

light-hearted manner, a large majority of the students in a class should be eager to attempt some sort of improvisatory response during the rests of this Blues piece. Students who are not comfortable thinking up something can be given the option of choosing from one of the teacher's ideas. What is especially useful about the call and response formation in this vein is that the entire class is engaged either as the caller or as an improvisatory responder.

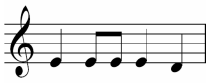
After observing a general level of comfort with the idea of one-note improvisation, the teacher can incorporate more notes into the process and open up the palette of choices for students. A type of scale can be introduced of notes that work, though it may not be the full blues scale, and examples of motives that fit can be given. From these motives, the teacher can demonstrate simple iterations of a motive, such as changing aspects of the rhythm, or changing selected notes so the student can create something that is their own.

So: (Fig 2.2)



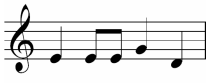
can next become:

(Fig 2.3)



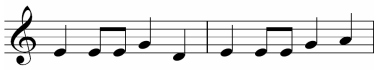
After two unique notes, there then can be three:

(Fig 2.4)



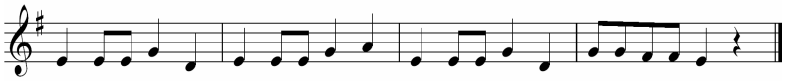
From this, the idea of melodic contour can be introduced

(Fig 2.5)



And finally, antecedent – consequent ideas:

(Fig 2.6)



Careful deconstruction and combining small ideas into a unified whole serves to demystify what may be an incomprehensible process into something logical. As improvisations become longer the teacher may be required to reshape the group response or have the soloist play over a bass line. Students who are especially comfortable with their improvisations – or, composed melodies -- can be selected to solo during a concert. The audience reaction is generally one of enthusiasm; this gives students further excitement in the program and their personal progression.

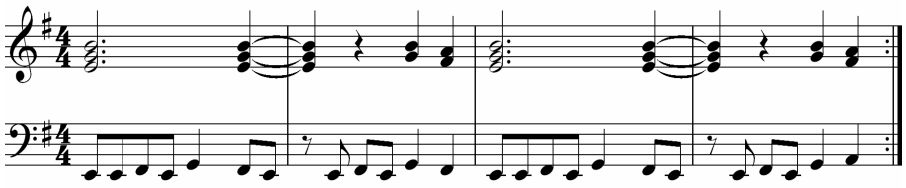
The intermediate string player who is new to improvisation, usually at the middle school level, utilizes a roadmap somewhat similar to the beginner's. However, if a student has never improvised or composed before, he or she will generally be more resistant to attempts at incorporating these techniques into the classroom. For instance, they may have developed an idea that they can't improvise, or that it is for other, perhaps "cooler", instruments such as the guitar – an instrument which incorporates improvisation and scales as a vehicle for this type of creativity at an early stage.

Yet, a method of demystification can again be used to draw this type of student in. It is best if improvisation instruction begins early in the year and is included along with a classroom team concept. Students should be comfortable with the idea of experimenting musically and understand that others should be supported in the process as well. Given that most middle school classes, where the intermediate student is most likely found, meet daily, it may be possible to shape the environment of the room. Putting the class into a circle is an effective way to introduce improvisatory techniques. Here, again, the one-note method over one or two measures is a nice way to get started, with complexity added in much the same manner as previously described. Adding a rhythmic accompaniment in the background seems to liven up the process. The author has often played the drum set in similar situations, having taught band and strings and thus having access to a wide variety of instruments.

The call and response blues strategy can be augmented with the concept of passing a riff, or motivic idea, around the circle. The teacher can select a student to begin passing the riff, perhaps one the teacher has composed, and the other students can imitate it within the framework of a groove that is being played. It is helpful if the groove stays in one key area, so that a single scale or limited choice of notes can be used in the riff and its development.

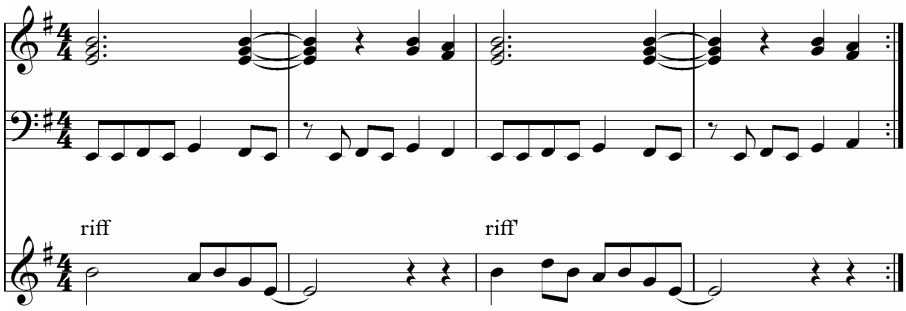
A groove utilizing a variation of "Big Blues":

(Fig 3.1)



The following is an example of a riff that can be passed around, in imitative form. Students can vary it as they pass it along, if they feel comfortable doing so, or stay with its original form. Volunteers can be selected who come up with their own ideas. The bass, cello, and viola can of course play the melodic line, though it is not written into the example.

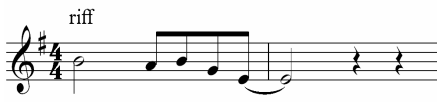
(Fig 3.2a)



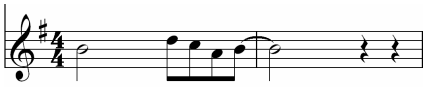
The circular seating layout, if practical, can be beneficial because it reinforces the idea of teamwork and commonality, especially in what may be unfamiliar terrain for the intermediate (or even, advanced) student. The teacher can also make an assignment to compose musical ideas that fit within a required framework, i.e. the above groove, or any set of parameters. For many students, this may be a more comfortable way to begin the exploration, and for the teacher, a way to elicit response. Since improvisation is a subset of composition, or a variation of it, this continues the process of confidence-building. Once a set of riffs are composed by each student, the teacher can look them over and choose those that best fit the groove being played in class. Through regular practice, whether in a circle format or not, students learn to pick up riffs by ear – an important aspect of improvisation – and continue building upon classroom teamwork and trust.

As the year progresses, the teacher should help students develop their musical ideas in a way that is as logical and methodological as possible. A key to success is to present straightforward strategies on variation. For instance, a riff, or motive, can have its pitches altered (within the key of E minor, in this case) with its rhythm intact:

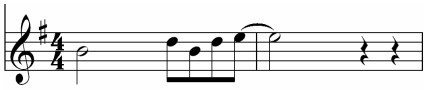
(Fig 3.2b)



(Fig 3.3)

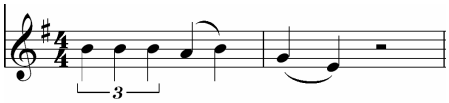


(Fig 3.4)



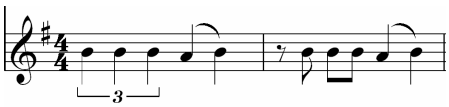
Or it can have its rhythm changed, with its original pitch order intact:

(Fig 3.5)



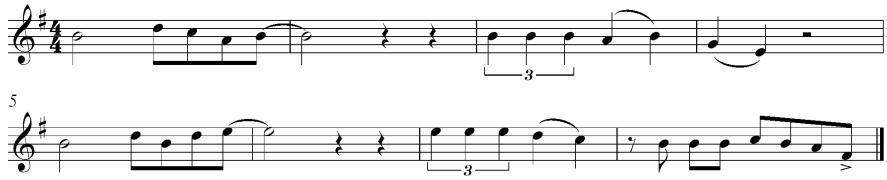
With a quick response added, as a diminution of the call:

(Fig 3.6)



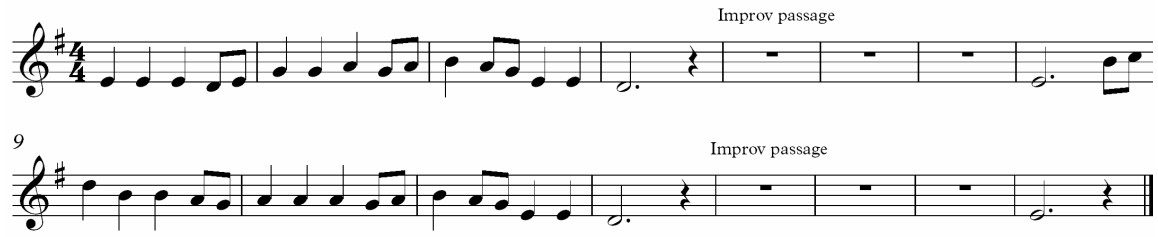
Or elements of the above examples can be combined to create a longer idea:

(Fig 3.7)



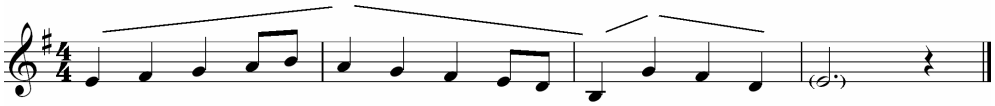
Attempts at building longer musical ideas can initially be developed within this framework of motivic variation. However, as the students demonstrate increased competency the teacher will want to move on to the concept of melodic development. A useful staging point for this moment will be the use of antecedent and consequent phrase completion within the context of call and response. The teacher can compose or arrange an antecedent phrase, again over a type of groove, or utilizing a melody that students find engaging. An example of a piece used with previous success would be the "Star of the County Down," a traditional Irish song that works well utilizing an E minor scale. First, the piece should be practiced and learned in its entirety, as with the scale and various patterns within the scale. Then the class can engage in a call and response with the soloist improvising or playing a composed consequent phrase.

(Fig 4.1)



An example of a consequent phrase the teacher can model with Fig 4.1:

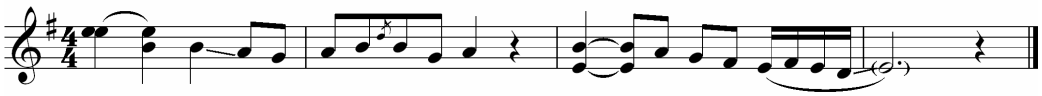
(Fig 4.2)



The preceding (4.2) is a good example of melodic contouring, with the phrase rising and falling in measures 1-2 and then following with a quicker version of the same contour in measure 3. An initial improvising strategy can use this idea of contrasting contouring. Students will more quickly understand this type of theoretical idea if it is drawn in with sloping lines that illustrate the melody's contour.

With its Irish and traditional idiom, this piece also offers opportunities to teach sliding, drones, double stops, and ornamentation. The following (Fig. 4.3) is antecedent phrase for Fig 4.1 that incorporates some examples of these techniques:

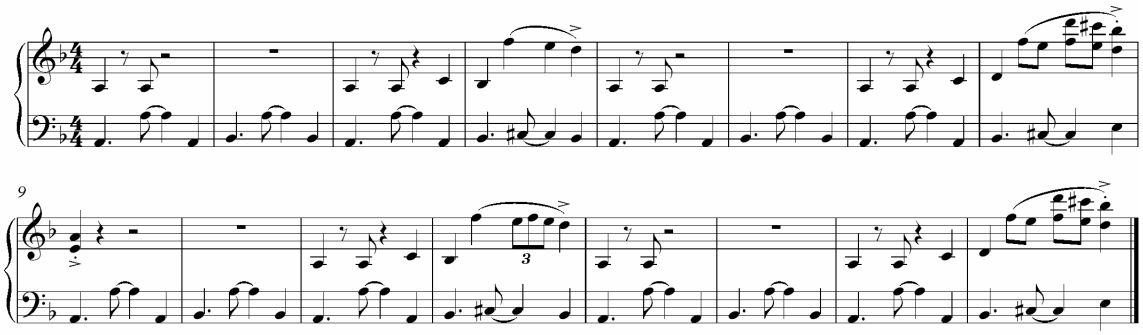
(Fig 4.3)



For the sake of brevity, only treble clef is notated, but the exercise (4.1) could be played in unison by the orchestra or adapted into a simple arrangement. As with motivic variation, the teacher might find it necessary to give some initial strategies, for instance, if the melody begins by climbing, it can resolved by descending. The teacher can also compose several examples and illustrate ways to modify them, for instance, by changing a few notes, to give the students further confidence. It may be necessary to have the students compose several possible consequents that can then be played in class. Throughout the process it can be emphasized that improvisation – in music and language -- is the ability to merge existing ideas into something that is new.

With melodic and motivic development introduced, students should be given the opportunity to improvise within the context of a piece. The use of scales can be expanded upon, perhaps by introducing those beyond the pentatonic, natural minor and major that are typically utilized. Below is a reduction of the solo section from an orchestral arrangement the author made of the Duke Ellington composition "Caravan." The section can be improvised in a concert D harmonic minor scale, utilizing an augmented second between the 6^{th} and 7^{th} that fits nicely with the mood of the piece. The punctuations in measures 1 and 3, etc., can be eliminated or added as necessary, while flourishes in 4,8,12, and 16 act as a type of response to the call of the student soloist which takes places in 1-3, 5-7, etc. They can also be dropped if the student feels capable of a more extended solo. Or, they allow the opportunity for many quick solos amongst different students in much the same manner of "trading fours" in a jazz jam.

(Fig 5.1)



In practicing scales, such as the D harmonic minor necessary in the arrangement above, it is best to move away from the technique of starting on the tonic. Jazz music and improvisation in general is more subtle when it circles the tonic but does not actually linger on it. The strings practice of beginning scales on the tonic tends to work against that notion aurally. So, exercises should be developed that try to start on the 3rd of the 5th scale, as well as the tonic, to ingrain these pitch centers within the student.

As mentioned previously, composition assignments can often augment the development of improvisatory facility. To develop compositional skill along with improvisatory skill, the teacher can give assignments that, for instance, seek to create the mood of certain environments. This can be phrased initially as "write music that fits a scene in a movie." Scenes can be whatever the teacher thinks of, or what is elicited from the students within parameters that best fit the level of musicality: "sneaking around without waking the cat," "car chase," and "riding on a magic carpet" are some ideas that have been previously successful for the author. The teacher can introduce the concept by playing certain famous passages from appropriate movies. The opening of Stanley Kubrick's *2001* is a good example of music that matches its scenic depiction, in this case,

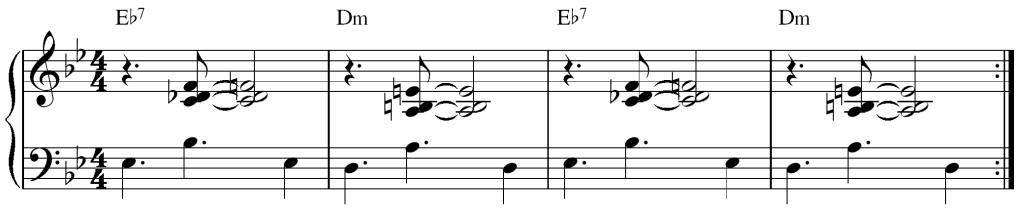
the grandeur of space. But student experience may relate more with various themes from *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, for instance. In a similar vein, the descriptive element of Holst's "The Planets" can be used to illustrate certain melodic effects and how they fit in with the myths each planet is associated with. In this way, one can tie string orchestra class into what students may be learning in English and Science.

At this point, we turn our discussion to techniques more appropriate for the student who has several years of improvisational practice in the classroom setting. At this stage he or she will be developing the ability to identify and play scales over specific chords and move with the changes in a piece. Here again, it is a positive thing if the teacher has some grooves he or she can play or pre-record so that students can practice improvising in class as part of daily warm-ups. Some standards that have nice grooves to warm up with are Miles Davis' "So What" and Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man." Both these pieces utilize several scales within their form and therefore can be used to practice changing over chords. By this time, students should have developed a certain confidence and routine to their in-class improvisation sessions, and should be comfortable working in the context of a traditional orchestra seating. The teacher should have a weekly or bi-weekly order of students who will solo during the class warm-ups, as in a larger group not everyone can practice their soloing every day. It remains important that any exercise includes the entire class, and again, the call and response pattern or something similar is most beneficial.

The author has used previously used a personal arrangement of "A Night in Tunisia" by Dizzy Gillespie to introduce simple changes to the improvising strings student. The two-chord Afro-Cuban groove that accompanies the opening melody of the

piece is one students find quite appealing, and features a repeating two-measure chord pattern. For the advancing improviser, this presents a good opportunity to work on changes within a limited format, while learning a classic of the repertoire. Below is a reduction of the pattern, arranged by the author:

(Fig 6.1)



The many different scale choices possible in this progression offer opportunities for experimentation and broad musical development. A traditional vertical approach to the solo would have the Eb7 played with a mixolydian scale and the D minor chord played as a D Dorian or D natural minor. However, the Eb7 could imply a #11, i.e a raised 4^{th}, which would afford a more horizontal approach of blowing through the changes using a D harmonic minor scale. The two chords could be approached using their respective pentatonic blues scales, as well. The changes afford the opportunity to experiment with a multitude of passing tones within the context of the scale that is being used.

At this stage, the teacher should continue emphasizing the more deeply musically aspects of improvisation including motivic contrast, melodic contour, rhythmic interest, and the dramatic flow of tension and release. Given that the student is beginning to work on chord changes, the idea of playing through changes using common tones, or pivot

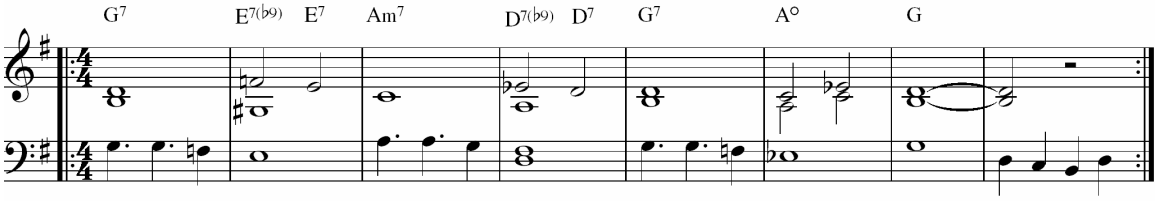
points can be practiced. Pivot points can also be used to slide in and out of keys within the context of one chord. For instance the #11 in an Eb7 chord can be used as way to move into an A major moment that may imitate a pattern played within the Eb mixolydian scale. It is perfectly appropriate to assign homework for the student to write out certain ideas which non-spontaneously develop these strategies. The nature of the changes in "A Night in Tunisia" allows a solo to be long or short, depending on the student's abilities and the number wanting to try it out. In a concert setting, only the best players should be presented, but in the context of day-to-day practice, everyone should get a chance.

The next step for students would be to develop strategies for longer solos over more extended changes. This builds upon the ideas developed throughout the aforementioned process, but also requires a greater theoretical backbone. While the strings student may have developed particular strength in melodic variation, a step back may be required in order to fully integrate harmonic concepts. Students should become adept at the ii-V-I and circle of 5ths progressions and may find the Aebersold series useful, especially its books with changes of this nature. It is also quite helpful to utilize and understand extended structures, such as A-B-A form, when constructing these more extended passages. The teacher can emphasize that formal contrast comes from a change in melodic or rhythmic style, or, more broadly speaking, in mood. Students can be reminded of their compositions which presented scenes from a movie, as a way to facilitate conceptualization of mood.

String orchestra repertoire which features extended passages for improvisation is sparse and still developing. The motivated teacher may have to arrange a pre-existing

jazz band piece or create their own composition. A piece this author has arranged is called "Danzon Almendra"[8] and features a section allowing for improvisation over a number of chord changes:

(Fig 7.1)



Several scales can be utilized in this passage, for instance:

M.1: G Mixolydian

M.2: E Mixolydian with flat 9 (or F Diminished)

M.3: A Natural Minor (based on the G in the bass clef)

M.4: D Mixolydian with a flat 9 (or Db diminshed)

M.5: G Mixolydian

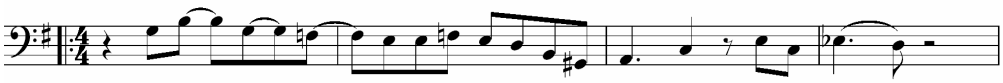
M.6: Eb Diminished

MM. 7-8: G Mixolydian

In more complex passages, as above, the student should learn the outline of each chord and learn to work with that before moving on to the scale. This will create an element of discipline that can be lost with the "noodling" opportunities that scales present. It will also help identify common tones and intervals between the measures, allowing for smoother changes. For instance, the F is a common tone in the G7 and E7b9, chord and it can be used to tie the two measures together. In a similar manner, diminished

chords are best introduced as chord outlines which act as moments of tension, looking either backward, or forward into the next chord. The leading tone element within each diminished chord should be initially emphasized, as opposed to its corresponding scale. In terms of rhythm, the student should try to match the distinct mood and syncopations evident in the Danzon style[9]. From that, students can incorporate ideas of double time, swing versus straight, triplets, or 2 against 3. Incorporating some of the preceding, the first four measures of the solo section could be exemplified as such:

(Fig 7.2)



Through the process of improvisation, students will likely be exposed to a wider diversity of styles than typically associated with strings, which can be a benefit in developing a fully representative and quality ensemble. This paper has touched on some of this diversity by including the music of Ellington, a traditional Irish song, a Cuban-inspired Danzon, and a piece using the Blues format. All these offer the teacher the opportunity to delve into historical, geographical, and cultural topics -- topics included within national and state music education standards. This essay has touched on some of the author's experiences and considerations when it comes to incorporating improvisation into an educational string orchestra setting. It has not dealt with the large and excellent amount of alternative styles music written out in totality for students. However, in the vast majority of cases, these pieces do not address the issue of attempting an improvisational or compositional endeavor within the group context. In bringing the

world of improvisation to their students, strings teachers can both improve their programs and have a good time doing so. They can empower their students by fostering the idea of language as a form of improvisation and applying that logic to music. While these techniques may stretch an already extended teacher in terms of the arranging and composing demands it makes, the benefits for the program will likely make them worthwhile.

Endnotes

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[1] The American String Teacher's Association had an extensive number of "alternative sessions planned for their 2012 Conference. Accessed on 11/9/2011. http://www.astaweb.com/Public/Conferences/National_Conference/2012_National_Conference/Educational_Sessions/Alternative_Styles/Public/Conferences/Alternative_Styles_Sessions.aspx?conferences=1&hkey=c87a8884-720a-413c-8cd2-4b796ace682d

[2] National Music Education Standards for Grades 5-8, Music Standard 3. Accessed on 11/9/2011. Posted at : http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/standards/national/arts-standards/5-8/music/music-3.aspx.

[3] National Music Education Standards for Grades 9-12, Music Standard 3. Accessed on 11/9/2011. Posted at: http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/standards/national/arts-standards/9-12/music/music-3.aspx.

[4] New York Standards are posted at: http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/cores.html#ARTS. Accessed on 10/22/2011.

[5] California Standards are posted at: http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/mumain.asp. Accesed on 10/22/2011

[6] Texas Standards are posted at: http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter117/. Accessed on 10/22/2011

[7] Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994, 2007), *9.*

[8] Alberlado, Vlades, arr. Irizarry, Jose Luis. *Danzon Almendra* (Peer International Corporation, 1939, 2001).

[9] The following are two characteristic passages from *Danzon Almendra*. The first is a refrain heard at several points in this piece as a way to connect sections. The second is the opening melody.