



HANDS-ON IMPROV IN THE MOMENT

MTC/IL 2025 RETREAT

Robin Keehn

Why does Improv matter? What is so different about improvisation and why is it one of the required 'streams' of the Simply Music program?

Musical improvisation offers a wide range of benefits—cognitive, emotional, social, and musical. Below is a research-based summary of how improvisation supports growth in each of these areas.

Summary of Benefits

Benefit Area	Specific Benefit	Primary Source
Cognitive	Creativity, Executive Function	Beaty (2015), Pinho et al. (2014)
Emotional	Expression, Confidence	Biasutti & Frezza (2009), MacDonald et al. (2012)
Social	Communication, Belonging	Sawyer (2003), Aigen (2004)
Musical	Aural Skills, Theory Integration	Kratus (1994), Sarath (1996), Pressing (1988)

Detailed Descriptions

Enhances Creativity and Divergent Thinking

Improvisation activates brain areas associated with creative idea generation.

Source: Beaty, R. E. (2015). The neuroscience of musical improvisation. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews.

Improves Executive Function

Improvisers exhibit improved planning, attention, and cognitive flexibility.

Source: Pinho, A. L. et al. (2014). Journal of Neuroscience.

Develops Auditory and Motor Integration

Improvisation trains real-time coordination between auditory and motor functions.

Source: Berkowitz, A. L., & Ansari, D. (2008). Neurolmage.

Promotes Emotional Expression and Regulation

Used in therapy to help process and express feelings through sound.

Source: MacDonald, R. et al. (2012). Music, Health, and Wellbeing.

Builds Confidence and Risk-Taking

Supports emotional resilience and willingness to take creative risks.

Source: Biasutti, M., & Frezza, L. (2009). Creativity Research Journal.

Enhances Communication and Collaboration

Group improvisation nurtures listening, adapting, and mutual understanding.

Source: Sawyer, R. K. (2003). Group creativity.

Fosters a Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

Inclusive musical experiences promote social bonding.

Source: Aigen, K. (2004). Music-centered music therapy.

Strengthens Aural Skills

Improvisers sharpen their ear for harmony, melody, and rhythm.

Source: Pressing, J. (1988). Generative processes in music.

Develops Real-Time Musical Thinking

Improvisation functions as spontaneous composition.

Source: Kratus, J. (1994). Journal of Research in Music Education.

Reinforces Theory and Technique

Helps internalize scales, chords, and musical structures.

Source: Sarath, E. (1996). Journal of Music Theory.

For additional reading, consider these articles:

<https://verybigbrain.com/psychology-thinking/the-cognitive-power-of-improv-how-thinking-on-your-feet-sharpens-the-mind/>

<https://www.artsandmindlab.org/how-improvisational-movement-and-dance-affect-the-brain/>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3957486/>

<https://neurolaunch.com/playing-an-instrument-and-the-brain/>

Dr. Charles Limb's TED Talk on Improvisation

Steps to Improv in the Moment

Develop your own ability to create in the moment.

Learn the projects in the SM Comp & Improv Program including:

1. Play a known piece in a new place on the piano. Move Nightstorm to a new place
2. Three note song: make up a riff with 3 notes. Find 3 chords in the LH that sound good with them
3. Reverse it: Find three chords that go together in the LH. Now find RH notes to go with them. This works best after students know Jackson Blues.
4. Teach the Blues Scale. Play LH JBlues for your students as they improvise the Blues Scale. If you have a group, have students take turns playing the LH and improvising the RH.
5. Help them make up a Blues Scale Riff (RH) to play over the LH Blues progression.
6. Encourage them to make up different riffs.
7. After Honey Dew, show students how to play any of the notes under their RH with the single LH note
8. Develop that further by keeping the RH in the C position as the LH notes change. Ask them if they would like to change the RH when the LH goes to the final G chord (after they have played around with the first part for a while).
9. Use mistakes, both rhythm and notes, as a jumping off point.
10. As students progress, use chord progressions as opportunities to improvise. C-A-F-G (Honey Dew) is fantastic to begin.
11. Take those chords and make the C minor. Requires that the RH E is Eb. Discover what else needs to happen.
12. Find new chord progressions together. Refer to I-IV-V for an easy starting point. Expand into II, VI, etc...
13. Take pieces students are reading and have them improvise (not arrange). Use them as a jumping off point.

<https://www.quittingculture.com/music-teachers-coach-2025>

