

The following content is provided under a Creative Commons license. Your support will help MIT OpenCourseWare continue to offer high quality educational resources for free. To make a donation or to view additional materials from hundreds of MIT courses, visit MIT OpenCourseWare at ocw.mit.edu.

INSTRUCTOR: So welcome to the lab. I'm going to start off today-- mostly everything we'll do is be hands on. I'm going to start out today just to reiterate some of the things that we talked about last Monday, and to expand on a few of those ideas about what we're doing here. And the idea of this little introductory lecture is just to say, what's our purpose? What's the expectations? What are we doing here?

Pretty much every place you go there's a set of expectations of what you're expected to do and what you're expected to be done to you. And it's very different depending on what you do. If you go to a baseball game, it's a totally different set of expectations of both what you're allowed and prepared to do and what you're expecting to see then if you went to a concert or if you went to a physics class.

All different stuff. All different sets of expectations. All different ideas about what we're doing here. So this little thing is to give you an idea of what this is about. What we're doing here.

The first thing-- which to me is the most important thing we already touched on in the last class-- which is just the idea that we're all improvisers. That simply by virtue of being a human, you're already a master improviser.

Where I go from there is that humans are also oral creatures. We understand the world through sound a lot. Not only through talking, not only through our experience of the sounds of other humans, but also the sounds in the world inform us all the time in all different kinds of ways.

And also each of us grows up surrounded by music and sound. We all have a personal universe of sound that is ours.

In this class and in this lab, what we'll be doing a lot is dealing with how to marry our awareness that we have from growing up as improvising people to our awareness of our understanding of sound. Our personal universe of sound. Putting those two things together and figuring out how to express ourselves improvisationally through using sound. Both individually and as a group.

So that's our basic task ahead of us. In this particular class, we're doing that by examining different ways that people improvise. Different methods that people use to structure improvisation. Different ways that they use to conceptualize how to improvise.

Because as improvisers, you come up here and when you're improvising without any music or without any prior structure, anything is possible. That's an overwhelming responsibility. You could do literally anything. How do you decide what to do?

So that's the first part of being an improviser is how do you start? How do you start? And a lot of this class is about how people start. Today I think Mark was talking about graphic notation, I think in some kinds of ways. To conceptualize improvising starting with something that's visual. A way to start.

And from this, then that gives you a starting off point where you can use your understanding, your intuition about improvising. Your understanding, your knowledge about sound. How it works, what it means. You can use all that stuff to say OK, that's my starting point. How do I use that stuff starting from here?

So a lot of this class is about that. How do you start? Where do you come from?

The other thing that's great about this kind of class, this kind of improvisation, this kind of group is that there's no particular stylistic boundaries to what we're doing. In a lot of different musical situations you go into, there's a set of boundaries just like if you go to the ballpark. There's a set of boundaries of what's going to happen.

You go to a jazz concert or you play in a jazz big band. There's a set of boundaries of what you expect to happen and you can-- pretty much everything you do is going

to be within that pretty well established set of boundaries.

In this situation, we don't have any of those. The boundaries that we have-- there's some set up by the structure of the class, which is bringing in these different artists who specialize in different ways of conceptualizing improvisation, but outside of that-- and looking at those specific artists and ideas that Mark's looking at in the class-- outside of that there's no particular boundaries to how we improvise or what we do together when we improvise.

The only boundaries are ones that we set up in the moment, and the way we set this up is through a series of structured improvisations. So most of the work we're doing here is examining improvisation or examining music through the use of structured improvisational exercises. There are ways to say what happens if you do this.

Just like when you're talking today about graphic notation. What happens if you do this and you say play it? So we'll work a lot with structured-- and there are ways to look at something on a microscopic level. To go and look at something closely. A particular aspect of improvisation or of music.

And then once you examine it, bring it into your conscious awareness, then all that understanding that you have is then available for you to use in a bigger context where you're improvising. Whether you're improvising on a squiggle or on a mode or on giant steps.

So what we'll do is we'll take these specific exercises, hone in really closely on little-- small ideas, and then we'll use those in a freer context hopefully later on to improvise together as a group.

So that's the second thing. There's no particular boundary. So you're able to use your entire personal universe of sound to improvise with. And what that means is there's no right and there's no wrong. So remember when we were talking about how-- making this a safe place to improvise. Making this a safe place to show who you are and to be who you are in the moment.

One of the reasons why it's safe is because there's no judgment. Because there's no boundaries set up by a particular style of music. There's no judgment about what's a right or a wrong sound. There's no judgment about what sounds can go together. Any sound can go with any other sound.

So what we're concerned with is not judging which sounds are right or wrong when you put them together. We're concerned with what does it mean? What does it feel like? Did putting those sounds together express what you wanted it to express? Did it mean what you wanted it to mean? Did it have the effect on the people that were observing you do it that you wanted it to have?

So it's really all sonic experimentation that we're doing together. Using these elements of improvisation and of music and of sound that we've grown up with our entire lives to say OK, if we do this and this, what does it do? What does it mean? How does it work? Do I like it or do I not like it? Does he like it? Does he not like it? It's awful.

The other thing that Mark also mentioned in the first class-- but I think is worth reiterating-- is that this is really about having fun. Improvisation should be fun. It should be fun in every way that you can have fun. So it should be crazy fun, it should be silly fun, it should be totally, serious intense fun.

The kind of fun where you're so engrossed in something that you lose all track of time. The kind of fun where you're looking at formulas and figuring out how they work. All the kinds of fun you could think of that you can have up here improvising, and that's what it should ultimately be about.

I think that's about all the things. We'll do some more, but that's basically-- just to give you an idea of where we're at here. And I mentioned before that the other really important thing-- but I'll reiterate that too-- is that it's important that you tell the truth.

That really what makes the difference between an improvisation that is compelling, that grips your audience, and one that people sort of fall asleep or run away from is

are you telling the truth? Are you expressing yourself? Are you showing yourself?

If you could do that. If you start from there, then every note, every phrase, every sound you play is going to have meaning. And over the course of this class, we'll figure out different ways to approach it. Different kinds of meaning that you can have. And you'll get a chance to experiment with different ideas of your own. To see what your personal universe of sound contributes to this group. Into what we do as improvisers.

So today I was think and we'd start off-- since we're dealing with graphic notation and I think we're going into some stuff with film improvising the film later-- we're going to skip over a lot of things I would usually do in the beginning group and go into some more stuff that's related to more visual parameters and movement. Different things that you might be encountering in the course of your next few classes and your next few assignments.

So what I'd like to do is start off with an exercise. We'll all come up without instruments. A lot of times I'll start off with some theater exercises or exercises that don't involve instruments as a warm up.

So we are filming today, so usually I'd do a circle, but I think for the sake of the camera, we'll do sort of like a semicircle if you can just get in a big arc here so you can all see each other but still leave an opening so we're not staring in the back of anybody's head.

This exercise is a very simple exercise. It's about movement and sound, and the way it works is this. One person comes out here to the center, or actually, thinking of the camera placement. The center might not work so good. Might have just a step forward from where you are, and what you're going to do is you're going to make a gesture and a sound.

It can be anything. It can be any kind of gesture, any kind of sound, and you're going to repeat it. And then everybody else is going to repeat it with you. Does that make sense? And then after we do it for a while, everybody gets into the groove, it's

how we got it going on, then you're going to go and take someone's place and they're going to step out and do theirs. And so on until everybody gets a chance to do it.

Yeah? All right. So, I'll start. Let's see. We might need to get a little space in between each other just in case there's movement involved. All right. Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing!

ALL: Boing! Boing! Boing Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing! Boing!
Boing!

[GROANING]

[CLEARING THROAT]

[POPPING SOUND]

INSTRUCTOR: Just be aware that everything that the person does actually has meaning. So their facial expression-- everything that they're doing is potential.

[WHISTLING]

[DRUMMING SOUND]

AUDIENCE: Bada!

ALL: Bada! Bada! Bada! Bada! Bada! Bada!

[SCREECHING SOUND]

AUDIENCE: Ding-dong.

ALL: Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

[SNEEZING]

[DEFLATION SOUND]

[DRUMMING]

[MEOWING]

[GRUNTING]

AUDIENCE: Who hasn't gone?

INSTRUCTOR: I don't know. Is anybody left? Did everybody go? Yeah?

AUDIENCE: Yeah? Woo!

INSTRUCTOR: Haha, good. Excellent. Now the interesting thing about this to me, and it's really fascinating and fun every time is that we do associate movement and sound. There was no accident that you chose this movement to go with that sound or that sound to go with this movement. There's connections we have in our brains about what kind of movement sound like what. And what kind of sounds would be what kind of movement.

So we're going on sped up time here, so what I'd like to do is get some instruments and what I want to do is have some people move and some people play. Let's go in half. So we'll have-- so, just for now-- let's see one, two, three, four, five six. We'll have you all play and you all are going to move.

I include you when I say play. It's all play. All instrumenting is playing.

So here's the thing. Here's what I want to do is-- oh, yeah, let's do that. Yeah. Let's just switch with somebody. Why don't we switch you since you don't have an instrument to pick up what those guys are already picking up.

So, let's do this. There's a lot of-- I've never done it quite this way before, so let's experiment some and see how this works.

All you people, what I want you to do is you have all this space to move in. You can move however you want. OK? You can walk around, you can turn around, you can stand still. Whatever you want to do.

Each of you. I want each of you to pick one of these people and play them. Make sounds that you think go with how they're moving. OK? No, we'll all go at once. Chaos is good in the beginning especially. Less stress.

Ready? All right? Get set. Go.

[VARIOUS MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: All right. Guys, guys! I gotcha now. You guys look like you're done. You guys look like you're done over here. Good, so do you guys-- do you know who was playing you?

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

INSTRUCTOR: Yup. Anybody else? Anybody else feel did you catch that correspondence between who was playing you? No? Who were you playing?

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

INSTRUCTOR: Anybody else?

AUDIENCE: Me too. I think it was the tall blond-haired thing.

INSTRUCTOR: He made the most dramatic movement initially, which attracts attention. Which is-- the other interesting thing is that you were moving in such a-- you were moving initially in a very rhythmic way, which allowed him to set up that rhythmic correspondence. And sort of everything in the group sort of revolved around that.

You remember we were talking in the first class about how when you set up a pulse,

when you set up a rhythm. It just attracts things to it. Yeah, it just does because we're-- that's how we survive. Right? Without rhythm we would all be dead. Literally.

Right? It's the rhythmic beating of our heart. It's the rhythmic bleeding in and out of our bodies. It's all these rhythmic movements inside of us that enable us to keep living. Our process is a rhythmic process as humans. Sleep and wake, you know? I mean we're surrounded by our rhythmic universe.

So, we're attracted to it. And we see that. We understand the sense of that. Really fast. Faster than other kinds of things. So it's just something to be aware of as an improviser. When you set up a pulse or when you set up a rhythm that repeats, it's going to attract attention and it's going to-- people are going to go to it until you repeat it for too long and then they're not going to hear it anymore.

Like the air conditioner that goes on in the room. You hear it's really loud at first and then you don't hear it. So rhythm is like that, too. If you repeat the same rhythm over and over and over again, after a certain amount, people stop hearing it. So that's another challenge when we're dealing with groove and rhythm is how to keep it alive and fresh even though it's repetitious.

Let's switch roles. I'm going to say a lot of different things and basically I say what comes into my head based on what happens, you know? Things that I see that I think might be interesting or might give you some kind of little insight, little idea about how improvisation works.

I don't expect you to particularly remember it all or even think about it much, but I do expect that-- a lot of this process is about bringing things to your awareness because we all mostly understand and have dealt with improvisation in our lives as a completely unconscious process.

It's something we use continually all the time throughout our entire lives, and probably-- unless you're a jazz player-- no one has ever even mentioned it or talk to you at all about how it works. Which is, to me, shocking. So we hope to rectify that a little bit in this because basically every innovation springs out of a moment of

improvisation.

So the more aware you can be, the more things about improvisation-- tools of improvisation that you are aware of and can bring into your consciousness and work with consciously, the more able you're going to be to be creative. To be innovative no matter what it is that you're doing.

All right, so we split up? We got our two groups? And go!

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Good. Good, good, good. That was a nice ending place. One of the things I think we'll have to work on fairly soon-- I don't think today, but maybe next time-- is ending. We'll do a little session on beginnings and endings.

But for right now I'll just stop you. Or you can stop for yourself if you feel like it's done. Right.

So now, let's switch this. So now what I want to happen is I want the people that are moving to pick a person that's playing, and move how they're playing. Now you guys are just going to start playing. Improvising together.

And at this point, don't worry too much about what you're doing. Just have some fun. Just like we were when you came out and did a sound and a motion.

And then you all who are moving are going to pick one of the people that are making sounds and you're going to move to their sounds. What's that?

AUDIENCE: Should we try and play something together?

INSTRUCTOR: I don't think you should try too much anything right now. A lot of times when you're improvising, if you try too much it makes it really hard to improvise. And one of the great things actually about doing structured improvisations, which is the secret goal of a structured improvisation, is to give your mind-- your conscious mind, your monkey mind, something to latch onto-- so that you can actually improvise freely.

So yeah, I don't think too much about it yet. We'll give you more things to think about as we go along. For now, I think it's just important to have some fun making sounds.

I mean, the interesting thing-- if you were paying attention on these last two exercises-- the interesting thing is the music was actually very interesting. You guys actually did play together even though that wasn't our objective, and you certainly didn't have any thing to say, oh, you're going to move together, you're going to play together.

The fact is that people-- you get a group of people in any situation doing something together, and they're going to-- doing stuff. They're going to start to do it together. Just how we work.

As you get better as an improviser and more conscious and more aware of the possibilities that are around and what your personal preferences and possibilities are, then you'll be able to be more conscious about being together. You'll have more choices.

But right now I think we can just rely on our natural instinct to make things sound good and be together. And not think about. OK, ready?

OK, here, let's just do this for a second. Because this is going to be harder. Because-- well, it might not be. See, like I'm already putting expectations on you. It might-- it's just going to be totally easy, actually. Let's just-- ready? Let's go. Go!.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: We're going stop here. Stop. Let's try this again. I'm going to add one thing.

One is I want you guys to feel free to come into here. So you have all this space. It's a little intimidating, but you have all this space to do stuff. So let's use this space.

You guys, I want you to also be aware of the rest of the group. We'll say that now, because-- but be aware of them in the same way that you were aware of the people

that were moving. You know, like when the people were moving and you guys were playing.

You were aware of what everybody was playing, but you weren't that worried about it. You were just playing stuff that felt good and related to what's going on. Let's do the same thing.

All right, you ready? Let's do it one more time. Same groups. So here-- everybody come out. Let's all spread out in here just so you're in a space already. You don't have to inhabit the space. You could just be in the space.

And now I want you guys-- before we start-- to pick one of the people to move to. So then you'll know-- you know already when you're going to move and when you're not.

You guys that are playing? Don't feel like you all have to start at once. Wait, let's add this. This is fun. Let's wait until you actually feel an impulse to make a sound, and then make a sound. OK?

So that's our structure. Wait until you have an impulse to make a sound. Then make the sound. As soon as you don't have that impulse anymore, stop. You guys pick ahead of time before they even start playing who you're moving to. And let's go!

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: OK, wait a second! Let's stop again. I gave you a bad start for this. Hold on, let's stop. Let's start again.

I gave you a bad start for this because the kind of exercise we just proposed is better if you guys have a little sounds just ahead of it. So you can actually-- you guys can make a choice about when to come in.

So let's start that again. That was my fault as director here. All right, so same thing. Inhabit the space. Get in the space. Come on. Everybody in the space. All right.

So you guys right now pick who you're following. Is everybody picked? All right, and you guys take a second. Just pay attention to yourself. Wait to feel like you want to play something, and then play.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Nice. Nice. Great ending, too. Awesome. All right, switch-- let's switch roles. people People who have been moving, get your instruments. That was great. That was great. The same exercise.

I'm just going to move this back a little bit just in case anybody gets enthusiastic. All right, so we got movers?

AUDIENCE: Mhm.

INSTRUCTOR: Inhabit your space. There you go.

AUDIENCE: OK.

INSTRUCTOR: All right. Now pick who you're going to follow. Pick which instrumentalist you're going to follow. Now the people that are playing instruments, take a moment. And whenever you're ready.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Excellent. Just for balance, let's do another one. Same groups. This time when we're playing, I want you to change the mood of what you were playing.

So same thing. You guys pick. Pick a different person than you picked before. You got it? All right. You guys ready? OK.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[LAUGHING]

INSTRUCTOR: Nice. Nice work. I must commend all of you. Those are really hard exercises to start

off the class-- for the first class, because they're very-- you know, you got to do some weird stuff. So I commend you. Thank you for being so generous if you were scared on that.

Let's have everybody get our instruments. We'll go onto something else because I wanted to get some graphic stuff in here too before we have to leave today. So that just gives you some ideas. Gets you into that universe of like, oh, movement and sound. They go together.

And if you watch, you can watch like while you're walking around. Watch people as they walk and talk. Just look at nature. See how sounds and movements go together, and that would give you some interesting ideas and some interesting things to play with-- oh, OK.

They give you some interesting things to play with when you start doing work with film. All right, here, you guys over there because I'm going to draw some things on the board. So

I'm going to just do some real quick things. Just playing around with gestures and graphic elements, and what first impressions of them are. So we're just going to have some fun playing with this. So, you know, talking about those kind of graphic parameters.

So this-- what does that sound like?

[STRUMMING INSTRUMENTS]

Right. So there's a lot of things-- there's a lot of things like that. That we just have associations with, you know? How about this?

[PLAYING INSTRUMENTS]

INSTRUCTOR: Interesting. So there's some interesting associations, which is that we tend to think of music visually. Particularly if you've grown up reading music. That's up. Up and

down means the same thing in whatever kind of space. Whether you're working in musical space or you're working in graphic space, you know?

Short and long-- We associate--

[PLAYING INSTRUMENTS]

Yeah, exactly. This

[PLAYING INSTRUMENTS]

All right, and if I do this?

[PLAYING INSTRUMENTS]

So short and long. It's a parameter that has a certain meaning. Whether you're moving or whether you're drawing or whether you're playing sounds. Up and down. High and low. What would that be?

[INSTRUMENT STRUM]

What would this be?

[INSTRUMENTS PLAYING]

Right, right. So all these kinds of things have meaning. And then there's things that have-- so there's all these different parameters like that. That we just have associations with because of our spatial awareness.

There's other ones that, if you're a musician, you might have a sense of. I mean there's no accident that that means what it does.

[STRUMMING INSTRUMENT]

What's that sound like?

[PLAYING INSTRUMENTS]

Good. So let's do this. I'm going to put up things-- I think this is fun. So what I want to do is-- like you've been doing-- play them, but what I want you to do is play them all together as a group. So I'll put it up and then you guys, I'll give you a little space and then you guys play it together and stop. And I'll put another one up.

We'll talk about them a little bit. Yeah, so crescendo, decrescendo. We learned that in music it means what it means, but also graphically it quite obviously means what it means. And I think in math there's like a greater or lesser thing going on here, too, right?

Is that the same meaning or a different one? No? No?

AUDIENCE: Close enough.

INSTRUCTOR: Close enough? What does that symbol mean?

AUDIENCE: Everything on the right is bigger than everything on the left.

INSTRUCTOR: Oh, OK.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

INSTRUCTOR: OK. Yup. Yeah, so the volume would be greater on the right than on the left. Yeah, so same thing. Volume is greater here in music than it is here. Yeah, cool.

All right. So here we'll just have some fun and play some different ones. I'll just conduct you to begin and you can end whenever you feel like it ends.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

That's fun How about this? Let's see.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

That's fun. I've never done this before. Let's see, let's see. How about this. What

would you do if I did this?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Cool. I figured I had to do that or else you'd just keep going and going. It would never stop. All right, let's see. All right, we're going to do this. Ready?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Good. All right, so we're going to-- I'm going to add-- I think that we could play with this for a little bit and add a couple other elements in here. So let's play this as if you're each playing this sequence individually at whatever pace and whatever timing you want. OK?

And it ends-- the piece begins whenever the first person starts. The piece ends whenever the last person ends. You ready?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Great. Awesome. Good. Let's play the same thing, except now I want you to all move as one. Ready?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Good. Now the interesting thing there, and this is pretty much true whenever movement is involved is that if you're trying to fall somebody, or you're trying to move as a group, the first person that moves controls the movement. Because this is-- if you're saying we're all moving together, then as soon as one person moves, everybody else has to move.

Here, let's do this. We'll add another part in. Let's play that first. What does that sound like?

[SQUIGGLY INSTRUMENT STRUMMING]

That's so weird that we all have similar reactions to these things. OK, so-- I guess not weird, really. But it's interesting to me. OK, so let's-- you can choose. You can choose either to play this part of this part. So it'll be a two-part thing.

The people that are playing each part, I want you to play your part together. So there's two challenges. One you have to identify the people that are playing your part and stay with them. OK. Ready?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Cool. So did you feel like you knew who was playing what? Yeah. Yeah. Who was playing what?

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

INSTRUCTOR: Anybody else?

AUDIENCE: I feel like it was kind of estranged. I feel like if you want to have everyone be on the same page, then like-- this is at least going through my head. How are we going to time this? And then is there a standard way to read from left to right?

Approximately from the time we finished playing those first two lines, whatever that means, we kind of start the squiggly thing, whatever that means. Just because I assumed that everyone else assumed that assumed that, et cetera.

INSTRUCTOR: Right. Yeah. Well let's say-- let's make that more explicit. Because you're right. People-- we are used to as a culture moving from left to right, but in all kinds of reading. And in music temporally you move from left to right. It indicates time.

In art, I'm not sure if that's necessarily true since it's more-- but definitely in music you tend to think that this is the beginning, that's the end, and we sort of been playing that way all along.

So let's say specifically this is the beginning. Actually, let's do repeats. We'll do it twice.

All right, so we are going to play it twice. That's the beginning. That's the end. So if you choose to do the squiggles-- technical term, the squiggles. Remember that.

If you choose to do that, then you're starting like a little after the third note.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

INSTRUCTOR: No. No. It might be more fun if you didn't. OK, you ready? You can start whenever you want. I'm going to stop starting you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Awesome. That was great. All right, let's add a third part. Anybody? Any volunteers? Want to add a third part?

[LAUGHTER]

INSTRUCTOR: Ooh. OK, you ready? Let's take the repeats off this time, though. Because I want to do a couple more and we're running out of time. OK, you ready? Whenever.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: That was cool. All right, let's do another one. We got time to do one more. This is when I feel really teachery where I have to do blackboard.

All right. First part-- let's do three parts. So key here is make them specific. Make them simple at this point. Makes it easier. Haha, did I blow your thing [? there? ?]

No, no. Go ahead. Go ahead. Do what you want to do. We'll see. Oh yeah, that's simple.

Or not. Oh. It's like that ribbon candy. Cool. All right, what's the second part?

INSTRUCTOR: Haha. Good. Let's do this one-- let's split into-- let's do it in two different groups. Just to make it-- because there's a lot of sound there. So we'll just split it in half.

One, two, three, four, five. You guys can split up if you want to. Would you rather do that or play together?

All right. Yeah, so you'll be one, one, one, one, one.

AUDIENCE: Can I have one?

INSTRUCTOR: Yeah, sure.

AUDIENCE: All right.

INSTRUCTOR: Yeah. All right, so you guys go first and then-- let's see what they sound like.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Good. Now second group, same piece.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INSTRUCTOR: Cool. I think that's a good place to stop. All right, thank you. So for this week as you're just-- as you're walking around, pay attention. Pay attention to the sound of movement and how they go together in your mind and outside of your mind.