

Ten listening suggestions for an introduction to free improvisation in jazz:

Ornette Coleman, Beauty is a Rare Thing (Atlantic/Rhino boxed set) or any of the individual Atlantic CDs.

Jimmy Giuffre, Thesis (ECM) with Paul Bley and Steve Swallow.

Albert Ayler, Spiritual Unity (ESP) with Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray.

Sun Ra, The Magic City (Saturn: Impulse LP and Evidence CD reissues) A successful long ensemble piece.

Sun Ra, The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volume 1 (ESP) Disciplined large ensemble improvisations, possibly conducted.

Cecil Taylor, Unit Structures (Blue Note) Contains a variety of textures and structures.

John Coltrane, Interstellar Space (Impulse) duets with Rashied Ali, drums

The Art Ensemble of Chicago, People in Sorrow (Nessa) Beautifully paced long-form group improvisation.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Fanfare for the Warriors (Atlantic; 32 Jazz and Rhino Collectables reissues)

John Zorn, Locus Solus (Avant) Trio improvisations using a simple interactive game piece.

Improvisation exercises for ensemble rehearsals:

Notes: Try exercises both with and without various constraints: in a given mode (or pitch set) or not, in a set tempo or rubato, in a meter or in an unmeasured pulse, etc. Limiting a short free improvisation to the C Major scale can lead to wonderful results, as can giving each player a different atonal set of pitches. Some of these exercises work better with small groups (3-10 players), while others could be done with a larger group. Vocalists and instrumentalists can work together or separately in any combination.

Call and response (a good way to start with reluctant or inexperienced improvisers at any level):

(1) Take turns being the leader. The leader calls, and the group responds together, either strictly imitating or freely answering the leader (specify which).

(2) Practice call-and-response duos. Think in terms of questions and answers, or conversational rhythms. If the pauses between call and response are awkward, try overlapping them, as in an enthusiastic conversation.

Listening exercises (also good for beginners as well as disciplining and focusing advanced players):

(3) "Forest"®: Everyone begins together on the leader's downbeat, each playing a short repeatable (not too high, with breathing space, etc.) ostinato figure in their own tempo. Try to hold your tempo and repeat your figure exactly while listening to how it shifts in relation to the other figures. Listen to the whole group texture, then try to focus on each of the other musicians in turn, never changing your ostinato. Keep playing for five minutes or so. The leader stops the group by giving a cut-off, either to all at once or one at a time. This exercise teaches patience and commitment to what you play, as well as listening skills.

(4) "Grove"®: Same as (3), but count off a tempo and everyone plays in the same pulse, but not meter.

Ear training improvisation exercises:

(5) Heterophonic unison: The leader plays a slow-moving lyrical melody, and the others try to play in unison, a fraction of a second behind (or longer depending on ability). The better the group is, the more chances the leader can take (a little faster, more chromatic, bigger intervals), but the leader shouldn't lose the followers. Take turns leading.

(6) Free chorale: Start on a unison and play a slow-moving harmonic choral-like improvisation, with no one emerging from the texture as a melodic soloist. Don't change notes too often, and try to hear all the pitches as they change. Try this using various scales and modes, then with the chromatic scale.

(7) Try to play imitative counterpoint in duos or trios. Don't be too strict — excessive imitation can be cloying and boring — but try to hear what the others are playing and use points of imitation here and there as a unifying device. Imitations can be literal, transposed, altered, or vague (specify and discuss).

Ensemble textures and roles:

(8) Soloist and accompaniment: The soloist picks two or three accompanists, decides who will start first, the soloist or all the accompanists together, and counts off the tempo (or specifies rubato and gives a downbeat). Keep the pieces fairly short at first (three minutes or so), and pay special attention to endings. Discuss them. When are they effective? Did someone hear a good opportunity for an ending while others played through it? Try all sorts of accompaniment textures: drones, ostinatos, chorales, imitation, contrast.

(9) Take turns conducting the ensemble. Specify a few simple gestures (soloist, long tone, short tone, high pitch, low pitch), and use familiar conducting gestures (loud, soft, play, hold, cut off).

Beyond exercises: compose and perform

(10) Combining any exercises and ideas above, plus your own, to make longer forms with graphic scores.

(11) Try programmatic ideas and get inspiration from other art forms. Improvise with poetry, dance, drama, silent film. Give the pieces titles. Try specifying only the title, or the title plus some musical parameters.

(12) Perform improvisations in front of an audience.