

Daryl Runswick

Notes for Improvisers



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The following notes were written for use with I Am A Donut in 1992. They apply when notation is used by the composer to give specific and detailed instructions to the improviser.

It may still [in the 1990's] cause surprise to find the terms *notation*, *composer*, *specific* and *detailed* used of improvised music. But improvised musics have always had rules and notations applied to them; in every tradition there are right and wrong notes; correct and incorrect stylistic devices; and these have always been notated, for everyone's convenience. Thelonious Monk used to say, don't improvise on the chords, improvise on the melody. Notation can be geared to melodic, motivic, modal and pitch-based improvisation. Harmonic (chord-based) notation has been widely used in the world of jazz for almost a century.

A common misconception about improvising is that it involves no preparation: supposedly you just 'let your hair down' or 'splurge' in some free and spontaneous way, as if improvisation were some kind of super-cool free-association ranting. Nothing could be further from the truth. Improvisation is a musical technique which has to be learned and practised (as any church organist will tell you). The great improvisers (J S Bach, Ravi Shankar, Charlie Parker) studied their craft with a great teacher and/or practised for years before performing in public (in jazz there is a slang word - *woodshedding* - meaning to lock yourself away where no-one can hear you for prolonged practice).

These notes are intended for musicians who are already competent in other disciplines, to help them begin to acquire improvising skills in conjunction with a notation system. Basic competence can be gained in a few days. You have to bring to your improvising:

- musicianship; you can't improvise well without a good sense of tempo, intonation etc.
- a sense of style; different pieces demand their own improvising styles, just as Handel and Corelli require distinctly different ornamentation.
- a clear set of rules; my RIG notation system is one such and I hope I have provided an easily-assimilated system for use by the concert player and singer.
- practice; as with driving a car, speaking a language or sight-reading, fluency comes with practice; also as with these things, once learned, never forgotten.

1. Treat an improvisation piece with the same respect you would a solo sonata; improvising does not mean coming unprepared.

2. When you practise, work on each event* separately, as if it were a normal passage with, say, tricky fingering or breathing. Work out what the notation means: get what the passage is about.

3. Now, very slowly, make a phrase on your instrument or voice which is *correct* according to the rules of the event. Let the phrase sit in your memory.

4. Work out a few more phrases for the same event. Work as slowly as you need to. Use your judgment to choose better phrases and reject worse ones.

* By the term *event* I mean a single set of instructions at any point in a piece.

5. Now practice playing your phrases one after the other - making sentences.

In this way improvisation is worked-up and practised. You do *not* have to create fresh ideas during each performance for it to count as true improvisation: even the world's greatest improvisers rarely do this (*especially* the world's great improvisers - listen to Miles Davis recorded in 1967 and 1987: you will hear *the same licks*).

Never write an idea down. Use memory only. You practise in order to *learn* the notation and *develop* ways of playing the event which you can remember and repeat.

6. Having developed your phrases, practise putting them in different orders. Do not be afraid of silences: the music will go on without you; silence is music; the accompaniment will continue anyway.

7. Vary your phrases as you repeat them: don't try to come up constantly with new material. A phrase repeated slightly differently gives the listener a formal handle on what you are doing.

8. Try to keep in mind the rules governing the event. In this way, as you become fluent, new things to play will occur to you while improvising, in addition to the things you have worked up.

Don't worry if you forget various things you've done. Make new things to replace them. This subconscious editing is all part of the creative process which makes improvisation different from executant performing. Never write something down to try to remember it. Let things go: new things will arrive.

9. When it comes to rehearsals and performances, do no more than glance at the event before and during your improvisation. Develop the habit that the glance *triggers* your memory of what the event is about. This is how many solo singers work when performing conventional music: the glance triggers the memory: reading in detail is unnecessary.

*Learn the notation, get the idea
Work up phrases, choose the best
Practise your phrases, link and vary them
Let go what you forget*

*Play by the rules, discover, create
Glance at the event, trigger the memory
Silence is music*