



Ben's Improvising Tips



Our **Zigzag Ensemble** workshop leader **Ben Markland** is a **bassist** with a lot of experience improvising in groups, playing many different styles of music. Ben is widely known and much admired, not only for his playing, but for his writing and arranging. He gained an MA in Composition from The University of Birmingham before embarking on a freelance career as both a performer and composer.

Zigzag Ensemble is an exciting creative music ensemble for 12 – 18 year olds. In Zigzag workshops Ben and the BCMG musicians encourage participants to explore and develop their improvisation skills whilst creating pieces from scratch, usually inspired by music featured in upcoming BCMG concerts. You can listen to some of the pieces Zigzag Ensemble have created recently online:

<https://birminghamcontemporarymusicgroup.bandcamp.com/album/zigzag-ensemble-19-20>

Some tips for Improvising

A mistake is an opportunity: if you play a wrong note, next time repeat it and emphasise it. Use it to springboard into something new.

Be confident: play with a confident attitude. If you look uncertain, the listener will feel uncertain. Playing with confidence brings the audience with you – and the other musicians if you are playing in a band

If you like it – repeat it: You will find that when you do improvise some phrases and musical gestures will stand out to you. Repeat these ideas and gradually make small changes with each repetition – change a note or rhythm.

Your Turn!

Here are some activities from Ben that you can try at home to help develop your improvising skills. Remember:

'Simple ideas are often the most effective'.

Take 3 notes and find 5 different ways of playing them: Think about the changes that can be made to the rhythm, octave, order, dynamics, articulation and tempo of the notes when playing them.

Play a rhythm 3 times but change the notes on each repeat: As you repeat the rhythm you could: play the rhythm on a different note each time; choose from a group of notes or a particular scale; use all 12 tones of the chromatic scale.

Create an idea using just one note: Try using the rhythm of words or sentences to create unusual rhythms and patterns.

Take a melody or chord progression you know as a starting point: Try adding an extra note(s)/chord(s) onto the end each time you play it. Then try keeping the same notes but change the rhythm.

Be playful – have fun! Squeaky, unclear, scratchy, breathy sounds can also be interesting. Explore your instrument and try to find unconventional sounds and ways of playing (tapping the clarinet keys, scraping the guitar strings, playing behind the violin bridge...). Now make these unconventional sounds a feature of your next improvisation.

Please send any recordings to learning@bcmg.org.uk