

# Beyond the Ink: From Lead Sheet to Masterpiece

Nick G. IntVeldt,  
Member, MTNA

This supplemental document describes some techniques that the author uses to teach improvisation from lead sheets to his intermediate and advanced piano students. Related items are also discussed, including why a teacher would want to teach improvisation, and some helpful hints regarding how to teach it.

## But First, What Is a Lead Sheet?

A lead sheet is a concise representation of a piano piece or song that gives only the melody line in conventional notation, along with chord symbols for the melody's harmonization. In the case of a song, the lead sheet may also contain the lyrics.

To play the piece or song verbatim from the lead sheet would produce a very boring result. The goal of improvising from the lead sheet is to produce an interesting and creative arrangement that embellishes and “fills-out” the essential elements provided by the printed lead sheet.

## What Kind of Music Are We Talking About?

Generally, the genres that can be found in lead-sheet form are old standard songs, including blues, jazz, rock-'n-roll, big-band, disco, and the like, as well as songs from Broadway and movie/TV themes. Classical music is not among these because of the importance of playing classical music exactly as written. (However, arrangements of classical music can be and have been improvised from the original score.)

## What Do I Mean By “Improvise”?

The term “improvisation” is usually limited to creating an arrangement of a song or piece (or part of a song or piece) at the time of performance. However, I broaden the meaning of the term to include any time the player is actively enhancing the lead sheet. Thus, the early stages of experimenting with many arrangement possibilities, through the solidifying stages of having most decisions made (and possibly of writing down the

result), and ultimately to performing the arrangement (perhaps with additional on-the-fly enhancements), all fall under my definition of “improvisation.” Why? It takes many years of experience for students to be able to deliver fresh and pleasing improvised performances at the time of performance, on-the-fly. Although that is the goal, early use of the word gives us something to call all the activity that leads to that goal.

### What Does Learning to Improvise from a Lead Sheet Offer the Student?

1. Students learn how to deal with chords. Although it's best to start with a rudimentary foundation in chord theory (triads: major, minor, diminished, augmented, roots position and inversions, and what notes make up various chords), working to improvise solidifies this theory and gives it an outlet for application. Students can progress from simple triads, through 7 and other four-note chords, to jazz chords.
2. Students learn how to read chord symbology from the lead sheets. This symbology conveys the same information as figured bass, but is not nearly as complex! Minor variations do exist, however, so the student may need to learn to read more than one method.
3. Students learn how to analyze the genre, mood, and style of a song or piece, which then informs them regarding how to best improvise it. For example, one might not want to play a love song like a Sousa march, nor would a heroic melody likely go well with an arpeggiated harmony that suggests ripples in a stream. (Or would they? It depends on what you're after. If you're trying to be humorous, it would work just fine!)
4. Students learn how to alter (and/or ornament) a melody in creative ways. They also learn boundaries: When does excessive alteration lead to a whole new melody? And along these lines, students learn how to create counter melodies by adding intervals to the notes of a melody.
5. Students learn how to alter harmonies in creative ways. How are the chords played - blocked, arpeggiated, or something more interesting? Maybe an ostinato instead of chords? Perhaps a different chord progression than what's written on the lead sheet? Perhaps different inversions than those written?

6. Students learn to distribute chords between the hands, and to use a larger keyboard compass than the middle third of the keyboard.
7. Students can learn about modulation and transposition, if their creation changes keys.
8. Students learn to listen to what they have created. Is it boring or exciting? Does it make sense, given the character of the song or piece or the goal of the arrangement? Does it have enough contrasts, or is repeated material simply repeated? Is most of the keyboard used, or do the hands tend to stay in only one region? Can I add an interesting introduction? A coda?
9. Improvisation is arranging. Students learn to arrange. The next step would be composition, and it's not a big step once a student has come this far.
10. Best of all, improvising is CREATIVE FUN! Once a student masters it, some magic happens. It becomes effortless and the student feels like they are in the audience, sitting back and watching their hands play, seemingly without any need for a brain.

### So How Does a Teacher Prepare a Student to Improvise from Lead Sheets?

Actually, the teacher needs to prepare herself or himself first. For many teachers, improvisation instruction is not in their core curriculum. While the teaching of classical music playing can be done with little (or even no) concurrent teaching of theory, successful improvisation relies heavily on the student's understanding of many elements of theory, primarily chord theory. If a teacher's most recent encounter with chord theory was in college, the teacher must consider brushing up before attempting to teach improvisation.

In addition to the above, teachers need to realize that there is a big difference in how improvisation is "taught," as compared to teaching from method books or classical scores. We are all used to teaching students to "play the ink" – that is, the notes, rhythms, and dynamics – exactly as written. While interpretation may be somewhat a matter of opinion, notes and rhythms are either right or wrong. And even interpretation is taught to the standards of expectation, given the extensive knowledge of how things are usually done in all genres and time periods.

Improvisation is taught differently because there is no right or wrong. The teacher can model, coach, and suggest, but that's about it. While the teacher may speak in general terms, like "Oh, that's interesting!" or "Hm, I'm not sure many people would find that to be musical," to tell a student that some aspect of their creativity is "wrong" simply won't fly. I'm sure this is a challenge for many teachers, but students will become confident of their creativity if the teacher is careful with his or her criticism.

So, what should a student know beforehand? Chord theory is at the top of the list. The student should understand how diatonic triads are built on each successive tone of a major scale. Concentration should be initially given to the I, IV, and V chords, sometimes referred to as the primary chords, both in root position as well as in inversions. Because every scale tone occurs at least once in the three primary chords, many pieces and songs (think folk songs or church hymns) are harmonized easily with just these three chords. It might be worthwhile to have the student create an ad-hoc melody in some major key using only diatonic tones, and then harmonize the melody using primary chords. Even though this is technically composition, not arranging or improvising, the techniques learned will apply to improvisation as the student progresses.

Although not required to begin, it may also be an advantage for the student to understand chord progressions and cadences, initially using just the primary chords. Then, the remaining four triads (ii, iii, vi, and vii<sup>o</sup>) can be introduced, along with their use and effect in chord progressions and cadences. When creating chord sequences with all seven triads, students can learn about what sequences sound great (i.e., "expected") versus those that are questionable or tend toward the *avant-garde*.

Note that the information in the last paragraph, as well as much, much more (such as chords in the jazz idiom) can be taught as the student progresses, if it isn't covered before the student begins.

Note also that all of the above should be taught in the minor mode as well, using the harmonic minor scale and its diatonic triads.

### But Wait, There's More!

Before setting out, the student needs to know how to decipher the chord symbols found on lead sheets. They should know that *m* means minor, *dim* or <sup>o</sup> means diminished, and *aug* or + means augmented. They should also understand symbols that include a slash

("/" ). This is the method used to indicate inversions. (Lack of a "/" indicates root position.) If your student understands figured bass, you could point out that both systems convey the same information, and compare how the two systems do this.

Other symbology could be explained as it is encountered, such as various 7 chords, *sus* 4 chords, etc.

### First Steps

An "easy" lead sheet should be selected for the student, with simple melodic rhythms and the use of only the primary chords. The student should play the lead sheet verbatim for a time, playing the melody with the R.H. and the indicated chords (and inversions, if any) with the L.H. It may be desirable to play the melody an octave higher to allow the L.H. to play the chords near the middle of the keyboard, which will be more pleasing than playing the chords too low.

After the student is comfortable with playing the lead sheet as above, a good next step is to have them play the melody as octaves in the R.H. while playing the L.H. as before. If a student's R.H. can't span an octave then this step should be skipped. However, doing this gets the student used to the notion of playing notes that aren't written, which may be a bit "weird" for some.

Finally, examine the chord symbols and see if the root/inversion indications could be improved. Will reassigning some root chords to inversions, or vice versa, or changing inversions allow the L.H. chords to flow better? If this results in the bass notes forming a nice melodic line, then the result will be 1) easier to play, and 2) sound better. (These two improvements ALWAYS go hand-in-hand.) If good alterations are found, they should be written on the lead sheet and the old chord symbols scratched out. There is a psychological aspect to this: the lead sheet (unlike classical music) is not sacrosanct and should always be viewed as revisable. The student should play the result and make further modifications if their "ear" says so.

### Then What?

The next step is to start becoming creative with the L.H. Up until now, chords have been played blocked. It is time to start playing them broken. To start, just have the student break the chords into eighth notes, using the same notes as when the chords are played blocked. The sequence of notes for the broken chord is: low, middle, high,

middle, high, etc. For example, the sequence of notes for a C major broken chord would be: C, E, G, E, G, E, G, etc. The number of notes played from the sequence depends on how long the chord lasts when played blocked. Using the C major chord again, if the chord lasts one beat, only C and E are played. If the chord lasts two beats, then C, E, G, E are played. Four beats: C, E, G, E, G, E, G, E. And so on. Interpolate and extrapolate as necessary.

Once the student has the above well in hand (pun intended), they can begin arpeggiating the L.H. rather than simply breaking up the chords into three tones. A good thing to try is two-octave arpeggios, while moving the R.H. up an octave to allow this to happen. This step is technically more difficult, as it requires “thumb-under” and “fingers-over” playing, as when practicing scales and arpeggios. Thus, it may take the student a while to master it.

The next step is a bit more challenging than the above two, and that step is to start adding chord tones to the R.H. The melody notes should always be on top, but the goal is to use the lower portion of the hand to “fill” with chord tones, and if possible, duplicate the melody note an octave lower with the thumb. A good way to start is to play everything in rhythmic unison in the R.H. Later, the student could experiment with breaking chords in the R.H. as well, to match what’s going on in the L.H.

I should mention that once students are at this level, or approaching it, there are lots of duet possibilities. The student or teacher on Primo can use both hands (an octave apart) to play the melody and chord tones, while the player on Secondo can handle the chords and arpeggiations. If creativity and experimentation are allowed to take place while playing duets, the result can be very synergistic. Oh, and FUN!

### Further On

Once the basics are mastered, the next steps rely on (and are limited only by) the student’s experimentation and creativity.

What about the chord sequence? Can a lead sheet that specifies only primary chords be enhanced if some or all of the remaining four chords (or others) are used? What does the theory of chord progressions tell us that might work? What sounds good? What doesn’t? What if I added a 7 chord here? A *sus 4* there? What if I change this chord from major to minor, or from minor to diminished? Does a deceptive cadence work near the end, and lead to a coda? The possibilities here for the student are endless,

and it gives the teacher a chance to teach the chord progression charts that can be found in any good textbook on the subject.

How about melodic alteration? Can I play with the pitches? The rhythm? Can I ornament with a grace note here, a trill there, or a turn over there? At what point have I created an entirely new melody? (To be avoided, by the way!)

Can I create a sub-melody that parallels the melody in the R.H.? In thirds? Fourths? Or a variety of intervals (to intersect with chord tones)?

What about rhythmic variation in the L.H.? Can I use a combination of arpeggiation and blocked chords? Can I create a rhythmic ostinato? Maybe use intervals instead of chords to create a “hollow” sound?

Meter changes? Can I turn a 3/4 waltz into a 4/4 ballad? Or a 2/4 march into a 3/4 minuet? Can I get funky and try 5/4 or 7/4? What changes do I have to make to the melodic and harmonic rhythm to make this work?

Can I emulate a musical period or a particular composer? What happens if I turn “Happy Birthday” into a Sonatina by adding an Alberti bass and scale passages? Or can I wish a “Happy Birthday” to the “Phantom of the Opera”? (Bound to get a laugh as a parody!)

### And Then Comes the Masterpiece!

The final touches relate more to the architecture of the final product as opposed to the development of individual tricks and tools.

Can I add an introduction to the piece? A coda? Should I use melodic content from the piece in the introduction and/or coda, or construct a similar melody? Should the intro and coda be book ends (very similar or identical material) or different?

Should I put a modulation to a new key somewhere in the piece? What should the new key be, and how do I get there? (This is very advanced stuff, because modulations to distant keys can be very tricky, and it also requires the student to be able to play in transposition.)

And best of all: How can I use all my new tricks and tools in combination to produce an interesting and compelling result? For example, maybe the improvisation starts out still, with an arpeggiated L.H., gradually building to a majestic march, and ends the way it started. Maybe it's the other way around: The introduction is a fanfare, then the first statement of the tune is quiet and arpeggiated, and the whole thing rebuilds to an ending fanfare, echoing the introduction. It is always a good idea to vary the style, and use different tricks and tools, so the result doesn't become too repetitive.

And now a true confession: I'm sometimes asked to play wedding receptions or background music for a party, etc. I hardly ever practice for these, because I'm confident that I can "pull it off" on the fly. So, armed with my Broadway and Old Standards fake books, I head to the event. Invariably I'll encounter a tune that I'm a bit rusty on. What to do? I play it one time through like a music box, high on the keyboard, with just the melody in the R.H. and simple arpeggiation in the L.H. I re-familiarize myself with the tune and chords as I go. Then, on the repeat, I feel confident enough to go into full-out improvisation mode. It sounds fine because it's varied. And nobody (except me) is the wiser that what I just did was practice the piece!

### In Conclusion

Improvisation can be a ton of fun. Although it's a lot of work up front, and requires on-going experimentation in order to not become stale, the freedom to create and express oneself and not be a slave to the printed material can be exhilarating! When one becomes really good at it, it can feel as if the brain is disconnected from the process and that the music somehow just magically flows from the fingertips. And with all the theoretical and practical knowledge obtained along the way, it puts the student on the threshold of pure composition, another activity that is deeply rewarding.

### Where to Find Lead Sheets

Lead Sheets can often be found in Fake Books, which are collections of lead sheets. These books are so named because the player has to "fake it" to perform the songs. Fake Books used to be illegal, because the publisher didn't pay royalties for the songs in the book. Therefore, they were hard to find, although I had an uncle who knew where to get them and kept me well supplied with fake books when I was a kid. Today, there are many legal fake books (I'm not sure if the illegal ones are still out there).

The one I use to start students on the path to improvisation is called “Your First Fake Book.” It is arranged by Alexander Citron and published by Hal Leonard (HL00240112). The advantage of this book is that the melodies and harmonizations are quite simple. The drawbacks are that the only key used is C, and sometimes the simplified harmonizations produce an awkward result that doesn’t match how it would be played by ear. Once a student is able to improvise many of this book’s tunes, it is time to move on to “real” fake books (an oxymoron, I know), where the songs are presented in their original keys and use authentic chord sequences.