

THE ISSUE OF IMPROVISATION IN MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DALCROZE METHOD¹

Dominika Massloch

The Stanislaw Moniuszko Music Academy of Gdansk, Poland

d.massloch@gmail.com

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Summary

The inspiration for this topic arose from the author's deep interest in improvisation, particularly its application across various domains of art, education, and everyday life. This article aims to highlight the significance and role of improvisation in music education. It explores definitions of improvisation from multiple perspectives, including historical and contemporary viewpoints. The article also examines Dalcroze's personality traits in relation to his improvisational abilities and presents different forms of improvisation within the Dalcroze method, as seen from both student and teacher perspectives. The final chapter features original exercises conducted with students in subjects such as choir, music history, eurhythmics, and piano improvisation. A key component of this section is the evaluation process, including student feedback collected during the activities. The author hopes that these proposed exercises will inspire educators, as recognizing the benefits of well-designed improvisation is essential to unlocking its full potential.

Keywords: improvisation, music education, Dalcroze method, eurhythmics

Definitions of Improvisation

Improvisation can be described through a wide range of – often contradictory – terms: action, moment, inspiration, cause, effect, consequence, amateurism, genius, spontaneity, and freedom. It both inspires and emerges from inspiration. Present in countless forms, improvisation shapes the world around us. It may arise as a serendipitous discovery or a conscious decision, as a polished masterpiece or a reflection of inexperience – and everything in between.

Improvisation plays a vital role in developing collaborative skills. When a group encounters a new situation, its members must adapt to one another and work toward a shared objective. Improvisation also offers a unique opportunity to connect with others – sometimes complete strangers – and to build authentic relationships in a short span of time, mirroring on a micro-scale what typically evolves over years in everyday life.

¹ The PowerPoint presentation of this study, along with links to relevant articles on improvisation, can be accessed at the following link upon requesting permission from the author: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1K6geX2J7xTVS5pnNJdOlz-CADJ_mFeJf9adZ3t0PzDE/edit?usp=sharing

Movement-based, musical, and theatrical improvisation especially encourage openness, adaptability, and creativity. Recognizing its value, many companies incorporate improvisation training to strengthen communication, foster creative problem-solving, and enhance teamwork among employees (Zaborska & Bania, 2020).

Improvisation is a part of everyday life. It represents a delicate balance between preparation and spontaneity, between readiness and surprise. At times, it takes the form of a deliberate artistic expression; at others, it serves as a spontaneous response to the unexpected. In every context, improvisation is a dynamic process – simultaneously a goal and a means, a challenge and a solution.

Musical Improvisation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Spontaneity and uniqueness are among the defining features of free improvisation. Yet, improvisation has often served as the foundation for the compositional process. Throughout music history, the outcomes of such creative acts have been remarkable. As Jaques-Dalcroze noted, “The most renowned troubadours and minnesingers were improvisers” (1992: 141). The influence of improvisation can be seen and heard in works where composers preserved these ideas – many of which have endured to this day. In the 17th and 18th centuries, improvisation was regarded as a mental discipline, shaped by the careful selection of harmonies and the precision of melodic lines. It was also motivated by practical and economic factors: musicians could avoid memorizing entire compositions by skillfully improvising variations on familiar themes (Poniatowska, 1980).

During the Romantic era, improvisation flourished as a powerful form of artistic expression. Initially, it served to showcase the performer’s technical skill and creativity. Over time, however, public improvisation declined in popularity, as repetitive ideas and excessive virtuosity began to overshadow genuine musicality. In the 20th century, new compositional approaches emerged, including aleatory techniques – those rooted in chance and unpredictability. From an acoustic standpoint, every musical performance can be considered aleatory, as precise notation never guarantees absolute precision in execution. Of course, improvisation in jazz represents a distinct and expansive subject in its own right.

In music, improvisation and composition draw from one another. However, improvisation tends to occur equally as an individual and group activity, whereas composition is most often a personal experience. In everyday life, we plan and systematically pursue our goals just as often as we improvise, naturally responding to the actions of others. Thanks to the Dalcroze method, cultivating this valuable skill, both individually and in groups, becomes possible.

The Beginnings of the Dalcroze Method

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, a Swiss educator, pianist, conductor, composer, and the creator of Eurhythmics, recognized the potential of improvisation as an educational tool. Improvisation in the Dalcroze method sharpens auditory and movement awareness,

enhances kinesthetic sensitivity, encourages authenticity, challenges stereotypes, and trains natural reactions – allowing one to be in the moment.

The Dalcroze method emphasizes expressing music through movement. However, Eurhythmics did not arise from a desire to refine bodily movement, but rather from the aim to achieve better results in purely musical terms. The seeds of Dalcroze's educational reform were sown during his harmony lectures at the Geneva Conservatory, which he began teaching in 1892. He observed that students paradoxically perceived chords as separate, simultaneously sounding notes, rather than as harmonies with their own internal energy and tension. Gifted with absolute pitch, Dalcroze analyzed this phenomenon and sought to help students hear differently and feel more deeply, so they could become better musicians.

The same issue emerged during sight-singing classes. Due to a lack of awareness or underdeveloped auditory imagination, students struggled to maintain accurate intonation and reproduce rhythms correctly. To compensate, they instinctively moved their limbs or nodded their heads while listening. This observation led Dalcroze to recognize the deep connection between rhythm and movement. Since rhythm provides meaning and structure to all musical sequences, he built his method around it (Jaques-Dalcroze, 1992). Improvisation is one of the core elements of the method, alongside Eurhythmics and Solfège – all three are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

Dalcroze's Personality

Jaques-Dalcroze set high expectations. He envisioned individuals engaged in Eurhythmics developing skills that closely mirrored the technique and proficiency of a pianist, the intuition of an improviser, the physical agility of a dancer, the musical insight of a theorist, the organizational abilities of a conductor, the patience and perseverance of a teacher, and the creativity and vision of an artist. Dalcroze himself possessed extraordinary musical talent and equally remarkable pedagogical skills. One of his students recalled an instance in which Dalcroze, having heard a piece only once, performed it almost entirely from memory during a concert – unfazed by the disruption caused when the sheet music fell beneath the piano platform. The student summarized the moment as follows: "The performers didn't notice the incident at all and detected no difference in the playing" (Van Sheltema, 1963: 18). Other accounts describe Dalcroze's frequent habit of humorously mimicking the movements of latecomers to his classes through piano improvisation, entertaining the group and demonstrating his exceptional skill.

Improvisation in Music Schools Nowadays

In the Dalcroze method, students in grades 1–3 of the first level of music school are encouraged from the outset to express music through movement, to experience and practice it with their whole body, and to improvise before acquiring theoretical knowledge of musical concepts. In rhythmics classes with the youngest students, improvisation primarily takes the form of movement. It often includes acting tasks that deepen the emotional connection to music. The most commonly used themes are those familiar to

children, such as mimicking nature, elements of games, sports activities, and characteristic professions. With proper guidance, students can effectively engage their imagination and creatively interpret the teacher's ideas. Improvisation fosters skills that support future creativity – a vital asset in today's world.

In eurhythmics departments of secondary music schools, learning music through movement begins anew, as the curriculum for grades 4–6 does not include eurhythmics. From the very first lessons, students encounter concepts already familiar from theoretical subjects, but now presented in an entirely different, embodied way. The classes encourage them to express not theoretical knowledge, but their felt understanding of musical ideas. As their personalities continue to develop, adolescents may experience a disconnect between their self-image and actual behavior, which can shift over time. Consequently, some students may show resistance to improvisation tasks. For some, the demand to improvise may provoke symptoms of performance anxiety, such as reduced concentration and focus, irritability, technical errors, trembling hands, restricted movement, irregular breathing, stomach discomfort, dry mouth, and an accelerated heart rate.

The teacher's role is to recognize these symptoms and develop a teaching approach that fosters a sense of safety and psychological comfort. Such an approach should motivate students to overcome personal challenges, encourage active engagement and growth, and support the gradual reduction of fear. Systematic exposure to anxiety-inducing situations helps students manage performance anxiety more effectively. Within the Dalcroze method, this can be achieved by progressively increasing the complexity of exercises and applying diverse strategies in their implementation.

From the learner's perspective, the learning process is always a form of improvisation. When a concept previously learned in a specific form is applied in a new context, its execution inevitably involves elements of improvisation. Music teachers should approach their work with prudence, empathy, and trust in their students. Improvisation, grounded in the principles of the Eurhythmics method, offers an engaging way to enrich lessons across disciplines and educational levels. It breaks routine, refreshes the mind, and can serve as a powerful source of motivation for continued learning. To help students develop this skill, the author conducted lessons based on original improvisation exercises with students from various schools, ranging in age from six to high school. During each session, the author collected students' reactions and feedback to draw conclusions and test her hypotheses.

Exercises Examples in Primary Music School Basics of Eurhythmics

Eurhythmics lessons offer opportunities for interdisciplinary development, enabling students to strengthen a range of skills—auditory, motor, vocal, and acting abilities. Working with new props stimulates creativity and curiosity, while also challenging students to learn how to use them effectively. In the proposed exercises, students are thoroughly introduced to the props and their potential uses. Beyond artistic and creative growth, improvisation exercises foster social skills such as teamwork, effective commu-

nication, and emotional regulation, along with qualities like patience, focus, and mindfulness.

In the following exercise, the teaching aids are coins, small round cushions, and the piano (Image 1).



Image 1. Pillow and Coins.

Exercise Description:

Students sit in a circle with the teacher. The teacher holds coins hidden in their hands, shakes them, and asks: “What makes a sound like this?” Students respond with their ideas.

The teacher then shakes the visible coins and instructs: “Use your voice to demonstrate how these coins sound.” Students improvise vocal sounds that resemble what they hear, while the teacher varies the way the sound is produced. Students mimic each variation with their voices.

Next, the teacher drops a coin onto the floor and says: “Sing how you think the coin sounds. Your sound should last as long as the coin moves.”

After completing the task, the teacher continues: “Now imagine these are not coins, but something entirely different. What else could sound like this? Close your eyes and listen. Then move as if you are the imagined object, person, or phenomenon – as you feel it.”

The teacher creates sounds by rubbing, shaking, tossing, or tapping the coins. Students respond with movement. Finally, the teacher invites reflection: “Now, one by one, each of you will show your idea. I will play music, and the rest of the group will repeat the movements.”

Students demonstrate their movements, and everyone recreates their ideas. The teacher takes one cushion and one coin and asks the students to imitate the objects using their voices, as in the previous exercise. Then, the teacher moves both props in similar ways – rolling them on the floor, dropping them, and tossing them. The teacher says: “In my imagination, this cushion became a coin. Now stand up and move to the music, imagining how the cushion can be used or what it could become. Each of you will have a chance to move with the cushion. For now, three people will receive cushions, and the rest will move their bodies to the rhythm I play. Then, you’ll pass the cushion to someone else.”

The teacher gives cushions to three students and improvises a rhythmic theme on the piano. The students move in response. The teacher then asks each of the three students: “What was the cushion for you?”

After hearing their answers, the teacher instructs them to set the cushions aside and says: “Now imagine that you are one of the objects your peers mentioned. Let your whole body become that object and move as it would.”

The teacher improvises music again while the other students move – either with or without the cushions. The task is repeated until every student has had the chance to work with a cushion and share their idea.

To conclude, the teacher divides the class into three groups. Each group is tasked with collaboratively using the cushions as a different object, moving together to the improvised music.

Student Opinions Gathered by the Author Following the Exercises:

“It was fun”; “You can imagine a lot”; “Super!”; “I liked it”.

In both classes, when asked to associate sounds with coins, students gave similar answers, including bells, scraping, cutting, mopping the floor, rain, and thunder. Each group also had students who mentioned less obvious activities or objects, such as eating ice cream, car pistons, a dishwasher, and horses.

Ear Training

The timbre of sound is a characteristic that enables differentiation between the tones of various voices. This ability can be cultivated in ear training classes, not only through exposure to the sounds of different instruments or the human voice. Everyday objects with distinct acoustic properties may also serve as tools to encourage students to explore sonic diversity independently and to engage in creative forms of auditory play.

Within the next exercise, the teaching aids are: piano, interactive white board, coins, plastic bottle caps, pencils, ceramic balls, coins, pouch, and original graphics score (Image 2).

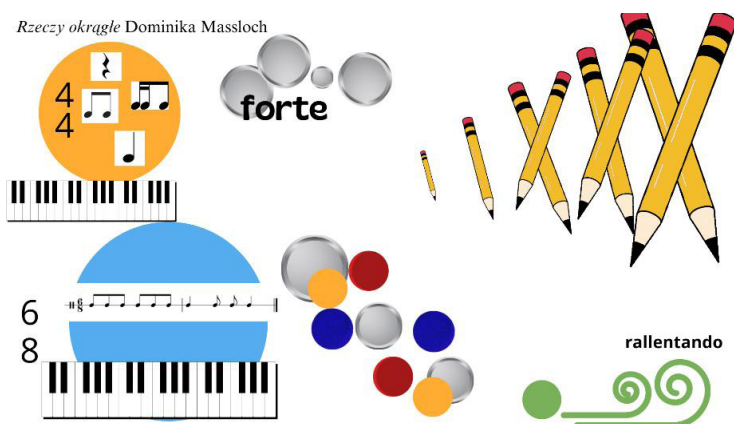


Image 2. Dominika Massloch: Round things.

Exercise Description:

The teacher distributes objects from a pouch to the students at random. After becoming familiar with the items, each student proposes a method for producing sound

with them and describes the timbre of the resulting tones. The teacher then presents the graphic score “Round Things” on the interactive whiteboard and explains its structure. Working collaboratively, the class improvises on selected fragments of the score, combining them into a cohesive musical piece (Image 3).

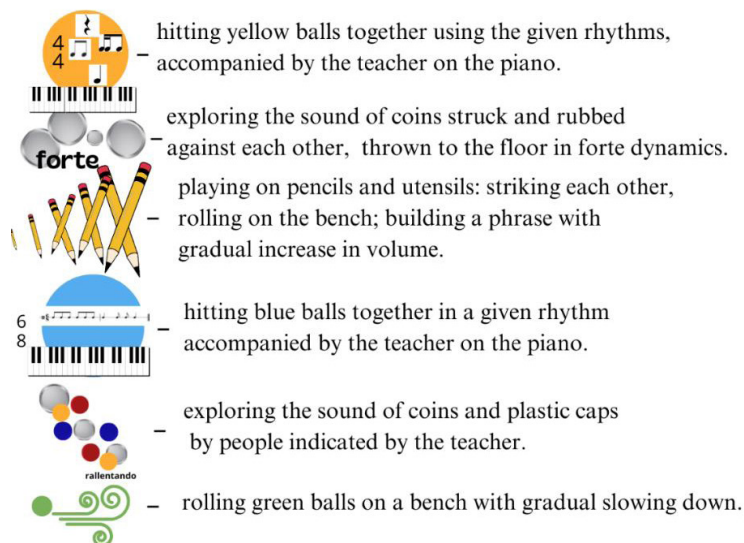


Image 3. Round Things – Performance Method.

Knowledge of Music

The next exercise challenges students with improvisation on multiple levels. They are required to adapt to a different space, follow instructions from another teacher, engage their whole body in response to the music rather than only listening, react to musical changes, and incorporate props into their performance.

Teaching aids include a speaker, artificial flowers, and students' notebooks or books, as well as selected recordings: Wacław z Szamotuł *Już się zmierzcha*; G. F. Haendel *Sarabande* from *Harpsichord Suite in D minor No. 4*, HWV 437; J. S. Bach *Two-voice Invention in F minor No. 9*, BWV 779; J. S. Bach *Herr, unser Herrscher* from *St. John Passion*, BWV 245; F. Chopin *Etude in C minor, Op. 10 No. 12*; T. Arbeau *Galiarde Antoinette*; F. Chopin *Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 9 No. 2*; W. A. Mozart *Serenade in G major No. 13*, KV 525; J. Haydn *String Quartet Op. 76 No. 3, II. Poco adagio, cantabile*; and F. Schubert *Die Forelle, Op. 32*.

Exercise Description:

The teacher plays selected excerpts of musical pieces and engages students in a discussion about the distinctive features of music from different historical eras. Students are then asked to express music from specific periods through defined movements:

Renaissance – Form a circle, hold hands, move sideways with sidesteps to the pulse of the music, proceeding to the left, and imitate the hand movements of a student chosen by the teacher.

Baroque – Move across the room in steps aligned with the rhythm of a voice part selected by a student.

Classicism – Balance a book or notebook on the head and move carefully in steps to prevent it from falling.

Romanticism – Move while using artificial flowers, pass them among one another, and convey the emotions expressed in the music through facial gestures.

Pause – Stop all movement and wait for the music to resume.

The teacher demonstrates various ways of moving to the music from each period, after which students replicate these movements. They then listen to additional excerpts played by the teacher and respond with appropriate physical expressions. Upon completing the exercise, the teacher and students sit together in a circle on the floor to reflect on their experiences, discussing feelings, impressions, musical tastes, and preferences for movement.

Author's Reflections on the Exercise:

A friendly atmosphere prevailed in the room, with students showing kindness and smiling at one another. At first, some felt awkward in the presence of other classes, but older students quickly adapted to the changes in the music, and younger students followed their lead. Overall, students spoke positively about the music from each era. Older students particularly appreciated the return to movement activities during the lesson. According to their reflections, the movements suited the character of the music and helped them perceive the pieces more vividly – especially those from the Renaissance, which they found the least appealing among all the eras.

Exercises Examples in Secondary Music School

Piano Improvisation

Piano improvisation is a distinctive aspect of the Dalcroze method, serving as one of the core subjects in the rhythmic specialization. Exercises in the form of playful improvisations are particularly effective in cultivating keyboard orientation and deliberate hand and finger muscle work. The primary aim of these exercises is not to produce a beautiful melody or adhere to a specific tonality. Instead, the following activity aims to foster unconventional approaches to music creation, potentially serving as inspiration for improvisation or composition when melodic or harmonic ideas are lacking. The teaching aid is the piano (Image 4).



Image 4. Idea 1.

Exercise Description:

The teacher claps a rhythmic pattern for the student, then instructs them to play on the piano in the given rhythm using only their thumbs and index fingers. The student

repeats the pattern several times. The teacher observes the student's improvised tonal combinations, articulation, and dynamics, offering suggestions on which ideas could be further developed. Together, they analyze the resulting harmonies (Image 5).



Image 5. Idea 2.

The teacher introduces the next rhythm on the piano, playing with both hands in a divergent manner while using only the thumbs, index fingers, and ring fingers. The student's task is to reproduce the rhythm with the right pedal in two variations: first, by transitioning smoothly from piano to forte, and then from forte back to piano, gradually slowing the tempo and resting the fingers on the final keys (Image 6).



Image 6. Idea 3.

The teacher instructs the student to close their eyes, position their hands in the air in any random formation, and then place their fingers on the keyboard in that same configuration, producing the resulting chord. The student then opens their eyes and, together with the teacher, discusses the chord's structure, its character, and any associations evoked by its sound. Based on the established mood, the student improvises music derived from the chord's notes. The final step of the exercise is to determine a title for the miniature composition, inspired by the associations of the improvised fragments, and to combine them into a piece with the following structure: Idea 1 – Idea 2 – Idea 1 – Idea 3.

Student Opinions Gathered by the Author During the Exercises:

"The hardest part is making it sound nice"; "Movement improvisation is somewhat okay, but playing is harder"; "I am not a pianist, so I can't play that well".

Author's Reflections on the Exercise:

The student was pleasantly surprised by some of the harmonies produced during improvisation and created melodies with ease. She recognized the tonic and incorporated it into the conclusions of her ideas.

Music History

Students are often required to memorize the sequence – most commonly chronological – of the keys of compositions within a specific genre created by renowned composers. A useful way to support this memorization is through an exercise that involves improvising rhythms and texts for melodies derived from combining key names, com-

posers' surnames, and composition titles. This type of improvisation integrates theoretical knowledge with auditory and vocal skills developed in ear-training classes. By employing individually designed rhythmic patterns, the process of memorizing and performing melodies becomes more engaging and enjoyable.

Teaching aids are: whiteboard, markers, piano.

Exercise Description:

The teacher writes three sequences of keys on the right side of the board, one beneath the other: B–C–Eb–D, C–B–A–D, and C–D–Eb–B–C–F–A–F–D. The teacher then asks the students what the written letters might represent and establishes that they are the keys of symphonies by three composers, arranged chronologically. The teacher explains that these form a sequence of sounds which, when rhythm is added, can serve as a melodic motif that is easier to remember than simply the names of the keys. By adding words, the keys can be linked to their corresponding composer:

Bb major, C major, Eb major, D minor – Robert Schumann;

C minor, Bb major, A minor, A major, D major – Felix Mendelssohn;

C major, D major, Eb major, B major, C minor, F major, A major, F major, D minor – these are Beethoven's symphonies.

The students vocalize the notes, after which the teacher encourages them to improvise rhythms vocally for the resulting melodies in various styles – such as murmuring, classical, jazz, or popular. In the next stage, willing students improvise rhythms on the piano based on the notes of the melody associated with the chosen composer.

Student Reactions and Comments Gathered During the Exercises:

Students demonstrated focus both during sight-reading and improvisation. Some expressed feelings of shyness, while others encouraged their peers to participate. One student asked the teacher: "Will you also do such an exercise with us?"

Choir

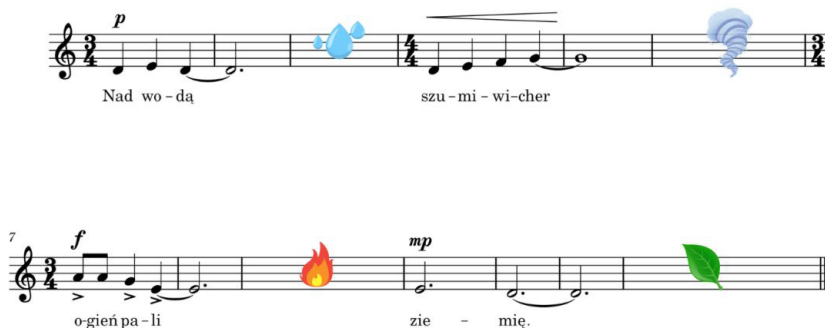
Vocal improvisation in a choir is a highly demanding task, with the greatest challenge being the reconciliation of many individual ideas at once. For improvised music to remain diverse and engaging, choir members must actively listen to one another, collaborate, echo ideas, or even set aside their own concepts to allow others space for expression. The interplay between harmony and dissonance, as well as between unison and polyphony, can be effectively harnessed in improvisation exercises.

The teaching aids used are: piano, Dominika Massloch *Żywioły* (Image 7).

Exercise Description:

The teacher introduces the students to the melodies of the four phrases in the piece. Together, they discuss the structure and content of the composition, after which the teacher vocally presents individual phrases for the students to repeat. The sheet music is then displayed, and the teacher explains that improvisation will take place both vocally and through movement in the sections marked with symbols representing the elements. In collaboration with the students, they determine how to vocally and physically imitate

each of the four elements: water, fire, air, and earth. After presenting and practicing these ideas, the students perform the entire piece, including the improvised sections.



The elements

Over the water the wind rustles,
the fire burns the earth.

Image 7. Dominika Massloch: *Żywioły* (*The elements*).

Students' Reactions and Comments Gathered During the Exercise:

"Improvising something original is difficult for me"; "I like improvising, but only when I am alone"; "Improvisation? We only had that during workshops."

Conclusion

The observations from the author's improvisation-based creative exercises clearly demonstrate the educational and developmental value such activities hold for both students and teachers. The author hopes her proposals for tasks, games, and exercises inspire educators across different subjects and levels of education. Awareness of the benefits brought by well-crafted improvisation is fundamental to utilizing its vast potential. As Dominik Porte, the director of the Dalcroze Institute, once said: "Improvisation is the foundation. Nothing more and nothing less" (M. Brzozowska-Kuczkiewicz, 1991: 41).

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УЛОГА ИМПРОВИЗАЦИЈЕ У МУЗИЧКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ У КОНТЕКСТУ ДАЛКРОЗОВЕ МЕТОДЕ

Циљ рада је да се прикаже вредност и улога импровизације у музичком образовању, али и њена примена у различитим областима уметности и свакодневног живота. У раду се разматрају дефиниције импровизације из историјске и савремене перспективе. Анализирају се и личност Ђмила Жак-Далкроза у контексту његових импровизационих способности, као и различити облици импровизације у оквиру Далкросове методе из угла ученика и наставника. У раду су представљене оригиналне вежбе реализоване са студентима на предметима као што су хор, историја музике, еуритмија и клавирска импровизација. Важан део чини евалуација, односно повратне информације студената прикупљене током вежби. Ауторка се нада да ће предложене вежбе послужити као инспирација музичким педагозима јер је свест о предностима добро осмишљене импровизације темељ за искоришћавање њеног великог потенцијала.

Кључне речи: импровизација, музичко образовање, Далкросова метода, еуритмија