

Sitting In On A Lesson With Master Musician Michael Smolens

Musical Creativity in Action

Michael Smolens, longtime OPEN EXCHANGE lister and Bay Area musician, performer, and instructor, offers keyboard, vocal, songwriting, and percussion creativity training on p. 55. This transcript reveals a "fly on the wall" look at a lesson in process. To get a closer peek you're just going to have to schedule your own lesson!

Michael Smolens (to student): It sounds like the way you were introduced to scales didn't foster much creativity.

Student: Scales felt more like a bad gym routine—I never really got what they were supposed to accomplish.

MS: Scales have their place, you know. They do help give you a certain 'lay of the land' from a theory standpoint. And scales can be very helpful for building your keyboard technique—if they are prepared physically. I generally like to make sure that a student's physical approach to the keyboard makes ergonomic sense. Tone production should feel effortless without creating stress.

Student: So where's the payoff for me now?

MS: Let's start with the premise that you're going to stick with your music if you're having fun while studying. Right? So that means that when you add a new concept you're still *playing and exploring*, rather than consuming information. OK?

Student: I'm following, but can you be more specific?

MS: I'd like to make up a simple exercise that will open some new improvisational doors. We're going to explore a scale from *three vantage points at once*—harmonically (2 or more notes sounding simultaneously), melodically, and rhythmically.

A couple of minutes later, Michael finishes writing out the two-bar musical model and plays it several times for the student.

The beauty of this little exercise is that you can start it on any note in the scale or any inversion of the chord. This exercise is one of many ways to keep the investigation of scales interesting.

Student: I get how this pattern could help my ear and my fingers, but I'd like to hear you *really* take off on it. Show me what I might be able to do a couple steps down the road.

MS: I'd be happy to improvise an extended version of what I wrote out for you—seeing what's possible can clarify the purpose of any exercise. And bear this in mind as well—if you consciously try to develop an improvisational idea too quickly, chances are very good the piece will fall apart. The body, mind and psyche need to absorb new musical concepts *slowly* if they are to build a skill that feels 'count-on-able.' Let's speak frankly. We live in a culture that is very 'results-oriented' and does not prepare people to discover how they learn best.

Student: Yes, I've been troubled by teachers who forget I'm a whole person.

MS: It's interesting you mention that. Have you heard of Howard Gardner? His research on the human brain has confirmed what people have suspected for centuries: that humans possess six (and some believe, seven) distinct, yet inter-related types of intelligences. The *real* work of a music student is not merely to absorb new information, but to recognize and appreciate modalities (intelligences) that feel more inherently accessible, while strengthening those modalities which are less developed.

Michael again plays the two-bar musical model for his student, this time creating subtle variations. About a minute into the improvisation on the written pattern, the student takes notice and asks a question.

Student: What was that?!

MS: What?

Student: You know... that.

MS: I don't know what you mean, but I will rewind my 'internal tape recorder' (*said with a grin*) and try to find what you are looking for. Remembering what you play is an essential skill to develop as an improviser.

Michael replays his previous improvisation until the student stops him again.

Student: That!

MS: Oh, that—that's called a polyrhythm—two rhythms occurring at once. What I'm doing in my left hand is a rhythm in duple (two) and in my right a triple rhythm.

Student: Let me try it. I remember doing something like that from a classical piece I played as a child.

MS: This rhythm is called "two over three" and has been played for literally thousands of years. It is, in fact, believed to be one of many *rhythmic archetypes* that are hardwired into our musical intelligence, in the same way that basic language skills are hardwired into the cognitive-linguistic portions of our brain.

The student tries the rhythm at the piano and encounters immediate difficulty.

MS: Don't worry—playing piano is more like playing a drum set than you might think. A good drummer should be able to play *four* different parts at once, but relax—we're only going to work with two. When you take two different rhythms and separate them into two very different parts of your body, you experience the coordination in a more purely physical way. This is more efficient than trying it on the piano and subjecting yourself to immediate self-evaluation.

Student: Yeah, I've beaten myself up over my sense of rhythm more than a few times.

MS: Let's begin by separating the triple rhythm in one hand and the duple rhythm in your voice. This technique allows you to experience the different rhythms as separately and therefore as effortlessly as possible. After you get more comfortable, we'll move to playing each rhythm on our laps. One of my students called it "rhythmic lap-dancing."

Within a short time, the student becomes more comfortable with both techniques for separating the two rhythms.

It seems like you're getting it just fine. Watch out for the tendency to speed up as soon as the rhythm is played with both hands! When you place both parts in your hands alone, your body has to make a finer distinction to keep the rhythms clearly separated.

Student: Hey Michael, what are those colorful plastic things along your wall? Are they instruments?

MS: Yes, they're tuned plastic tubes.

Student: Oh really, I thought they were there just for decorations.

MS: They are real musical instruments, cut to precise lengths so you can play a pentatonic scale (five-note scale). They're really fun! They have the great advantage of using big body movement, while still creating distinct pitches. Pitched percussion instruments allow you to hear notes without immediately getting bogged down with the fine motor coordination of piano playing. Such instruments can look like a keyboard (vibes or marimba) or drum (African tone drum, steel drums, or drum set). Piano students generally find themselves freer to get any complex rhythm on percussion because it is a new experience and they avoid the common



pitfall of self-criticism. And, by the way, a piano *is* a percussion instrument.

Student: Let's start! By the way, what do you call these things?

MS: "Boomwhackers." They're designed by an innovative percussion instrument maker in Arizona. They have made their way into filmscores, recordings, and live performances. *The student, with the help of the Boomwhackers, solidifies the polyrhythm very quickly and becomes quite excited.*

Student: This is really fun! It's like being on a swing set for the first time since my childhood.

MS: Now that you're so comfortable with the polyrhythm, let's try switching hands and put the triple rhythm in your other hand. Most people naturally favor one hand for one rhythm, and when you place that rhythm in the other hand, it's like seeing a photo in reverse—the same work of art has a brand new context.

Student: I get it. I'm left-handed and in the polyrhythm we just did, I automatically put the triple rhythm in my left hand.

MS: I think you're ready now to take this rhythm to the piano, but let me show you a trick. Play a short, repeating idea in one hand, while tapping out the other rhythm on the top of the piano with your other hand.

Student: I'm shocked—I feel secure in each rhythm. It finally feels like a comfortable groove. Let me see if I can switch rhythms in each hand.

MS: Piece 'o cake! The last step is to put both hands on the piano with each hand playing as short a repeating pattern as possible to insure that you stay connected with that basic underlying *rhythmic archetype* called—remember?—"two over three."

Postscript:

When a student grounds an essential rhythm in their body before taking it to the piano, they become much more secure rhythmically as an improviser, composer, and interpreter of other people's music. Once someone breaks down a complex rhythm in this manner, 'falling out of rhythm' will not cause a disruption of the musical flow or create frustration. They will be able to tap more easily into the rhythms already existing in our musical psyches. For that knowledge has always been in their bodies; it has merely been forgotten.

