

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: The Art of Improvisation
Subject: Rova Saxophone Quartet
Discipline: Music

SECTION I - OVERVIEW	2
SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT	3
SECTION III - RESOURCES	5
SECTION IV – VOCABULARY	7
SECTION V – ENGAGING WITH SPARK.....	8
SECTION VI – ENGAGING WITH SPARK – ADVANCED.....	12



Rova Saxophone Quartet member Lawrence Ochs
plays during rehearsal.
Still image from SPARK story, February 2004.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

The Art of Improvisation

SUBJECT

Rova Saxophone Quartet

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the concepts and practice of improvisation in music and other creative artforms through the works and history of the Rova Saxophone Quartet

STORY SYNOPSIS

In “The Art of Improvisation,” SPARK gets an insider’s look at the Rova Saxophone Quartet, a vanguard musical group that has improvised its way along the cutting edge of the music and sound art scene for 25 years. SPARK joins the members of this remarkable group for their anniversary celebration, with a new take on works by free jazz saxophonist Steve Lacy.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing
Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance
Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently
Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another
Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To introduce students to the ideas of free jazz through listening, playing and discussion
To provide context for the understanding of improvisation in music and beyond
To inspire students towards risk-taking in the creative process

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story “The Art of Improvisation” about the Rova Saxophone Quartet.
Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer
Cassette player, CD player, or computer audio program

MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects
Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on [Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) at www.kqed.org/spark/education.

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

In “The Art of Improvisation,” Spark gets an insider’s look at the Rova Saxophone Quartet, a vanguard musical group that has improvised its way along the cutting edge of the music scene for 25 years. Spark joins the members of this remarkable group along with their international musical guests for their anniversary celebration, with a new take on works by free jazz saxophonist Steve Lacy.

The Rova Saxophone Quartet was founded in the Bay Area in October, 1977 by Jon Raskin, Larry Ochs, Andrew Voigt and Bruce Ackley, and performed its first concert at the third annual Free Music Festival at Mills College in Oakland in 1978. The ensemble draws on the work of a broad range of musicians, including avant-garde composers Charles Ives, Edgard Varese, Olivier Messiaen, and John Cage as well as free jazz musicians John Coltrane, Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy, and Ornette Coleman. Rova composes new material, records, and tours, often collaborating with like-minded colleagues such as guitarist Henry Kaiser and Italian percussionist Andrea Centazzo. Members of the quartet have been commissioned to write music by both Meet the Composer/Commissioning Music USA and Chamber Music America, which has commissioned 20 works from Rova over the years. In August, 1988, founding member Andrew Voigt left the quartet and was replaced by Steve Adams, formerly with the Boston-based Your Neighborhood Saxophone Quartet.

Early in its history, Rova performed both at the Vancouver New Music Society (1978) and the Moers International Festival of New Jazz in Germany (1979). Over the next few years Rova played to audiences throughout North America and Europe, and in 1983 became the first new music group from the US to tour the Soviet Union. The tour was documented in a film, “Saxophone Diplomacy,” which originally aired on PBS. Rova returned to the USSR again in November 1989 and released a CD titled [This Time We Are Both](#). In 1986, the quartet hosted the Ganelin

Trio, the first Soviet jazz group to appear in the US. The trio performed with the Rova Saxophone Quartet at its first Pre-Echoes series of collaborative events, which would later include concerts with Anthony Braxton, John Zorn, Terry Riley and others.



Rova Saxophone Quartet members Steve Adams (left) and Larry Ochs rehearse for their 25th anniversary performance. Still image from SPARK story, June 2003.

In 1999, Rova began presenting two annual events in the San Francisco Bay Area: New Music on the Mountain, which hosts several acts outdoors at Mount Tamalpais every September; and Rovate, which features special collaborations between Rova and such guest artists as Sam Rivers, Wadada Leo Smith, Gerry Hemingway, Satoko Fujii and Nels Cline as well as commissioning up-and-coming local composers to write new music for Rova.

THE BIG PICTURE

“In the '60s, we all went into revolutionary mode, and abandoned all precepts (melody, harmony, rhythm and form), taking the music to the brink of destruction, and afterwards returning to completely refreshed traditional limits (melody, harmony, rhythm and form), but not defensively, only driven by the search for freedom, independence (interdependence really, jazz being collective) and creative invention, no defense being necessary.”

--Steve Lacy, Findings: My Experience With the Soprano Saxophone.

Free jazz is an experimental movement in jazz that began in the early 1960s and continues to this day. Sometimes called "avant-garde," free jazz remains a controversial and mostly underground style, influencing much mainstream jazz, while often being ignored or dismissed as a viable style. Free jazz dispenses with many of the rules of pitch, rhythm, and development, though it need not be atonal or lack a steady pulse. Some free jazz musicians, such as the Bay Area's Pharoah Sanders, have even had very popular records in the style.

Alto saxophone player Ornette Coleman is generally credited with introducing free jazz to audiences and critics when, in 1959, he brought his quartet from Texas to do a two week stint at New York's Five Spot jazz club. The style originated, however, with a number of performers, including Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, and John Coltrane.



Rova member Bruce Ackley giving direction during a rehearsal. Still image from SPARK story, May 2003.

Free jazz marked a radical departure from previous styles, since typically, a soloist does not have to follow any progression or structure but rather is encouraged to go in an unpredictable direction. In addition, often two soloists will play different, dissonant solos simultaneously.

When Coleman and others were debuting this type of music, musicians, critics, and audiences—even those that were most sophisticated at the time—questioned whether it was music at all. In fact, free jazz demands of its audience a different kind of listening, bringing to the forefront the listener's expectations of a piece of music.

Free jazz musicians often put together ensembles composed of instrument groupings that were unconventional--sometimes radically so. The foundation of more traditional jazz ensembles is the combination of horns, piano, upright bass, and drums. Some musicians experimenting with free jazz dispense with this format in the search of new sounds and musical possibilities, sometimes omitting the piano or the drums, other times doubling and tripling the number of same instruments.

The success of a free jazz performance can be measured by the musicianship and imagination of the performers, how colorful the music is, and whether it seems logical or merely random. Success in a free jazz performance can also be gauged by the extent of effective collaboration between the musicians. This type of teamwork—defined by experience, good communication, close listening, and mutual respect—is critical to the success of any collaborative venture, especially an artistic one in which all performers take risks.

SECTION III - RESOURCES

TEXTS

Bailey, Derek. Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1993.

Jost, Ekkehard. Free Jazz. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1994.

Lacy, Steve. Findings: My Experience With the Soprano Saxophone. Paris: CMAP, 1994.

Litweiler, John. The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1990.

Stearns, Marshall W. Story of Jazz. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Such, David G. Avant-Garde Jazz Musicians: Performing 'Out There.' Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.

WEB SITES

Rova Saxophone Quartet – Ensemble's Web site including mission, history, performance history, and discography - <http://www.rova.org>

Jazz Review – Web site dedicated to jazz, including reviews of jazz music and publications, interviews with musicians, photographs and images of artists, as well as tour and concert information that is updated monthly - <http://www.jazzreview.com>

Free Jazz – Web site discussion board featuring on-line discussions about improvisation, philosophy, artists, performances, venues, administrative, criticism, interviews, and trading. – <http://www.freejazz.org>

European Free Improvisation Pages – Web site dedicated to free improvised music in Europe, including audio clips, video clips, concert listings, biographies and record labels – <http://www.shef.ac.uk/misc/rec/ps/efi/index.html>

MEDIA

Rova Saxophone Quartet, Saxophone Diplomacy: Live in Russia, Latvia, Romania, hatART, June 1983.

Rova Saxophone Quartet, This Time We Are Both, New Albion, 1989.

Rova Saxophone Quartet, Resistance, Victo, 2003.

World Saxophone Quartet, Plays Duke Ellington, Elektra/Nonesuch, 1986.

29th Street Saxophone Quartet, The Real Deal, Antilles, 1987.

29th Street Saxophone Quartet (w/Fontella Bass), Stances A Sophie, Universal Sound, 2000.

Art Ensemble of Chicago, Live at Mandel Hall, Delmark, 1972.

John Zorn, Spy Vs. Spy: The Music of Ornette Coleman, Elektra/Nonesuch, 1988.

The Kronos Quartet, 25 Years: Retrospective, Elektra/Asylum, 1998.

Ornette Coleman, The Shape of Jazz to Come, Atlantic Records, 1959.

Ornette Coleman, Free Jazz, Atlantic Records, 1960.

John Coltrane, Ascension, Impulse! Records, 1965.

John Coltrane, Meditations, Impulse! Records, 1965.

Pharoah Sanders, Karma, Impulse! Records, 1969.

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Transbay Creative Music Calendar – Event listings for experimental, improvised, noise, electronic, free-jazz, avant-garde, modern composition, and other forms of contemporary sound in the San Francisco Bay Area - <http://transbaycalendar.org>

Bay Improviser - Web site offering links to local artists, concert schedules, music reviews, and other improvisational music resources. - <http://www.bayimproviser.com>

Luggage Store Gallery – San Francisco – The Luggage Store Music Series features experimental and improvisational music programs. - <http://www.luggagestoregallery.org/luggage/music.php?page=noflash>

Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College - Oakland, CA – One of the country's foremost contemporary music programs, including regular performances for the public. - <http://www.mills.edu/LIFE/CCM/CCM.homepage.html>

SECTION IV – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Arrangement

The framework for a piece of music or composition; a specific structure or roadmap for how a piece of music should be played. A piece of music can be arranged in different ways, using different instruments, tempos (speeds), and expressions of the melodies and harmonies

Commercial

Music considered “commercial” is generally that which the music industry deems marketable to the public, thereby making it profitable. Usually this is music that is accessible to a large number of people – often less abstract and challenging

Composition

The arrangement or organization of artistic parts to create a unified whole - a musical composition may be written or improvised

Creative action

The process by which music is created, usually between two or more people communicating with each other and taking risks together

Free Jazz

A term used to describe post-1957 developments in jazz music. Like “Dixieland,” or “bop,” “Free Jazz” is used to describe the time period following the peak of the “hard bop” era. Sometimes also called “outside,” “avant-garde,” and “new jazz”

Improvise

To invent or compose without preparation; to make from available materials. In music, one improvises by composing a melody or an idea in the moment, using all one’s available abilities and experiences

Legato

A musical term instructing that a note or phrase be played smoothly, evenly, and with connection between notes

Percussive

A musical term instructing playing a note or phrase by separating them or striking them or in some way, imitating a percussive instrument

Risk

The possibility of loss or danger

Saxophone

A wind instrument with a single-reed mouthpiece and a usually curved metal body, available in a variety of sizes, created by Adolphe Sax (1814-1894) in Belgium

Solo

A musical composition or passage for an individual voice or instrument, with or without accompaniment. In jazz, an artist taking a solo usually plays an improvised melody

Staccato

A musical term instructing that a note or phrase be played in a very short, abbreviated manner, with space separating each note from the next

Style

The way in which something is performed or someone expresses him/herself (Each individual has their own style or manner of expressing themselves, and it comes out in their music or art)

Tonal range

The sound of a distinct pitch, quality, or duration of a musical note, used to describe the spectrum of possibilities of how a musical note or phrase may sound, including terms like staccato, legato, percussive or sweet

Vamp

A solo played over a repeated rhythmic or melodic line of music

SECTION V – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

NOTE: For all of the activities and exercises listed below, consider making audio recordings of the students playing as a document and as a learning tool. Because improvisational music is not scripted, many wonderful and interesting sounds and musical intersections occur. These can become powerful learning tools for students, providing opportunities for them to listen to their own playing as well as to the playing of others, to consider what “works” and doesn’t “work,” and providing them with important documentation of progress and experimentation to be used in later improvisations.

"Free Jazz" - as a product of its time

Ask students to research the history of jazz and specifically “Free Jazz.” What social and political events were happening in the US in the 1950s and 60s? Challenge students to construct a timeline of key social and political events of that period and indicate landmarks.

Move on to talk about the Free Jazz artists in terms of the historical period in which they lived. How were Free Jazz artists such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, or Steve Lacy inspired by or responding to their cultural and social environments?

Consider concepts such as “free,” the intentional avoidance of synchronous harmonies, and collaboration, and invite students to discuss what these concepts tell us about the culture that developed and supported this form of jazz?

Ask students write a 1000 word essay on:

How does the concept and form of Free Jazz reflect the culture from which it came?

RELATED STANDARDS

MUSIC

Grade 1

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Diversity of Music

3.1 Use a personal vocabulary to describe music from diverse cultures.

Grade 2

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Compose, Arrange, and Improvise

2.4 Improvise simple rhythmic and melodic accompaniments, using voice and a variety of classroom instruments.

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Diversity of Music

3.3 Describe music from various cultures.

Grades 3 – 8

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Processing, Analyzing, and Responding to Sensory Information Through the Language and Skills Unique to Music

Listen to, Analyze, and Describe Music

1.3 Identify melody, rhythm, harmony, and timbre in selected pieces of music when presented aurally.

Defining and Responding to Music

Ask students to define what they think music is and list the definitions they suggest on the board. Play some examples of Free Jazz from the discography and invite students to respond to the following questions:

Is all organized sound music?

Is there a relationship between form and the emotions evoked?

What range of emotions does the music produce?

Besides terms such as melody and harmony or rhythm, challenge students to describe music using terms such as tonal shape, color, texture as well as emotional reaction.

Defining and Responding to Music (continued)

For younger grades, have students listen to different musical compositions and create pictures or drawings based on how the music makes them feel or on the images it conjures up. Encourage students to think about what colors, shapes, or textures to choose to represent different sounds.

Educators can build on this exercise by introducing the concept of “synesthesia,” which refers to a moment in which a person has a physical experience or sensation from the stimulation of one sense that causes a perception in one or more different senses. An example might be when a bright color of yellow seems to sound like a trumpet, or a deep baritone note sung by a singer might feel like velvet to the touch. Students can discuss the concept and then relate different emotions, colors, textures, and/or movements to different musical sounds.

Experimenting with Sound

Ask students to bring in an object from home or use existing objects in the classroom, such as pots or pans, spoons, empty bottles, paper, books, etc. Or, make instruments from paper, containers, etc. Encourage students to experiment with the sounds of each object by striking them in different places with different objects, such as blowing on it or through it. The objective is for students to create as many different sounds with each object as possible, playing with 3 facets:

Pitch – a particular musical key (high versus low sounds)

Dynamics – variation and contrast in force or intensity (intense or soft strikes)

Tempo – the speed of the music (how fast or how slowly a work is played)

Ask students to begin by finding as many different pitches – high versus low sounds – that an object can make. They should try using just hands or perhaps striking the object with another object, like a pencil or a stick or a coin.

RELATED STANDARDS

MUSIC

Grades 9-12 - Proficient & Advanced

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.5 Identify and explain a variety of compositional devices and techniques used to provide unity, variety, tension, and release in aural examples

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Compose, Arrange, and Improvise

2.5 Perform on an instrument in small ensembles, with one performer for each part.

Compose, Arrange, and Improvise

2.6 Compose music, using musical elements for expressive effect.

2.8 Arrange pieces for voices and instruments other than those for which the pieces were originally written.

2.9 Improvise harmonizing parts, using an appropriate style.

2.10 Improvise original melodies over given chord progressions.

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

Analyze and Critically Assess

4.1 Develop specific criteria for making informed critical evaluations of the quality and effectiveness of performances, compositions, arrangements, and improvisations and apply those criteria in personal participation in music.

4.2 Evaluate a performance, composition, arrangement, or improvisation by comparing each with an exemplary model.

4.4 Describe the means used to create images or evoke feelings and emotions in musical works from various cultures.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/>.

Experimenting with Sound (continued)

Suggest they experiment with how loudly or quietly those sounds are produced. Finally students should see how quickly and slowly they can play the “instrument” and then try combining the areas, playing fast and softly using high pitches, or loudly and slowly using low pitches. This activity will demonstrate how many different textures or tonal ranges can be created.

Learning to Improvise

Once students have experimented with each object and the sounds they make, encourage them to create simple compositions using available materials. In other words, to improvise! They should try creating an “A-B-A” composition, meaning one that starts off in one way – we’ll call it the “A” section, then develops into a “B” section which just needs to be different, then returns to the way it started, or “A” section. Perhaps everyone should start by playing their “instruments” slowly and quietly, then, as an ensemble, develop into the “B” section, by playing faster and louder. To end the piece, suggest that everyone finish the way they began, by getting softer and slower again. As an improvised piece with a beginning, middle and end, they can create an infinite number of compositions – and perhaps some students can take solos in the middle.

The hard part is improvising as an ensemble without a conductor! This requires everyone to listen closely to each other so that they move into each section at the same time, responding to each other. If someone makes a change, others need to choose to follow or resist.

SPARKLER:

* Duets - Have students sit in a circle, each with their own instrument. Start with two students playing a simple tune or sounds on their instruments in unison. After 30 seconds to one minute, have one student stop and another student start, using the musical ideas last being expressed. Go around the circle, letting every duo play for at least 30 seconds together before passing on the musical conversation to the next person.

After all students have played, discuss the music and how it changed or stayed the same. Do the duets change because of the style of each student or the nature of their instruments? What variations might take place if there was a consistent dynamic, pitch, or tempo?

Talking about Improvisation

At one point in the SPARK story about the Rova Saxophone Quartet, one of the musicians stops playing and says that he’s “having a hard time working with the music being played.” How do musicians working in an ensemble collaborate? Watch the SPARK story a second time and assemble a list of words that describe how the musicians collaborate and communicate to produce effective music? Discuss the concepts of freedom, collaboration, communication, and improvisation. What is freedom in music? What is improvisation? How do they relate to each other? Can there be freedom without rules? Can there be improvisation without any structure?

Pursue these ideas in a discussion on what it means to improvise, applying them to the following example situations. Ensure students have the opportunity to talk through the scenarios in pairs, before sharing their thinking with the whole group.

Is there a difference between what the Rova Saxophone Quartet does and what a music or nightclub deejay does in today’s post-modern dance scene?

Is spinning a record or improvising a 3-4 hour session of music using samples (excerpts of different musical compositions) the same as improvising on an instrument like a saxophone?

As a group, talk with students about the concept of improvisation. In what other art forms do artists improvise? How would an artist improvise in theatre? In the visual arts? In singing? In writing? In filmmaking? Extend the discussion to other instances in which people improvise outside of the arts, such as when playing sports, when dealing with an emergency, or when giving a school presentation.

SPARKLER:

* What are the differences between improvising and pretending? Name 10-15 situations in which it is important to be a good improviser.

Drawing on the list of improvisational moments identified, invite students to develop and improvise their own improvisational moment in front of the class. To begin, ask each student to describe 2-3 situations on paper (losing your homework, getting locked out of the car, etc.). Put all of the papers in a hat and invite students to each choose 2-3 each, but not look at them. Then ask each student to read their written situation and act it out, improvising what s/he would do in that situation, until the class guesses the situation correctly.

SECTION VI – ENGAGING WITH SPARK – ADVANCED

The following activity is adapted from Larry Ochs' compositional notes for the Rova Saxophone Quartet published at <http://www.rova.org> as "Food for Thought." Please visit the Rova Saxophone Quartet's Web site for a full review of Ochs' descriptions of compositions for and techniques used by Rova. This activity as well as the other techniques described on the Web site, is most likely appropriate for accomplished student musicians playing at a proficient level in Grades 10-12 or at advanced levels in Grades 9-12.

Composer Larry Ochs calls this the "simultaneous solo." This exercise is usually for a maximum of three players. Invite 2-3 students at a time to undertake this exercise together.

Begin by asking each student to follow a written composition, and then to expand on this material as a solo player, inventing ways to make his/her solo fit with the other players' who are doing the same thing. Challenge the students to make their simultaneous solos "work" together musically while improvising. Structurally, this will require students to start from an initial written motif or idea – we'll call it **A** – and to then improvise on the idea **A** until it "works" with the ideas being played by the other players' **A**'s.

Once this complementary collaboration works, then experiment with another idea – **B**. The second idea can be any musical motif that fits the mood of the group.

Then phase out the original idea **A** and play **B** alone (with variations) until it works with the other players' ideas. That is, play idea **B** until the relationship between a **B** idea and the music being played by the other players can be distinguished from one another.

Introduce a third idea – **C**. As this idea is introduced, phase out **B**. This process of introducing new ideas and phasing out older ones can continue through successive ideas. The speed of the phasing is up to the individual player and is primarily independent of the other two players involved.

It is important to keep in mind that the introduction of new ideas in music must be influenced by what is being played by the group. While this sounds simple, bringing these ideas to successful realization musically will be challenging.

If you have recorded the session (which is advisable), play the recording back for the students, and invite them to consider their playing and their collaboration.

- How well did they listen to each other and respond musically to each other ideas?
- How might they change and/or improve upon their work together?

Use this discussion as a jumping off point to consider other exercises and musical ideas.

RELATED STANDARDS

MUSIC

Grades 9-12 - Proficient & Advanced

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Creating, Performing, and Participating in Music

Compose, Arrange, and Improvise

2.5 Perform in small instrumental ensembles with one performer for each part (level of difficulty: 5; scale: 1-6).

2.6 Compose music in distinct styles.

2.8 Create melodic and rhythmic improvisations in a style or genre within a musical culture (e.g., gamelan, jazz, and mariachi).