

# Learning to Improvise Using the “Baroque” Method

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## 1 Overview

This document describes how I learned the basics of improvisation.

The fundamental challenge is to be flexible enough to create interesting lines against the chordal background of a song. My “baroque” method attempts to teach scales, chords, positions and the fretboard—all at once.

## 2 Introduction (TLDR Version)

In the baroque period, the main style of playing variations on a theme involved playing a lot of notes. These notes were usually played on every eighth or sixteenth note, and were composed so as to fit both the original melody and the chord progression. This type of playing is shunned today because it sounds “busy”. **I’ve borrowed some of this approach for my method, which is intended to teach the flexibility necessary for improvisation, not improvisation itself.**

My method is a step-by-step approach to learning improvisation skills by **playing on more or less every eighth note, all the time**. It encompasses using scales, arpeggios, thirds, sixths and various ornamentations.

In brief, the steps in the method are:

- Pick a small number of interesting songs in different keys and learn their chord changes.
- For each song, learn the melody in several positions (open, 3<sup>rd</sup> fret, 5<sup>th</sup> fret, 8<sup>th</sup> fret, etc.).
- Play along with the song **many, many times**. Play a note of your choice on more or less **every quarter or eighth note in the piece**. The note should either be a **melody note, a note from the chord, a note from the scale or a note that transitions to (anticipates) the next chord or melody note**.
- Shift positions (i.e. lowest fret used by index finger) until all reasonable positions are familiar.
- Learn to “hit” (land on/play) the “money” notes at the correct time. That is, work your persistent note pattern so that you strike important melody notes or distinguishing notes in the chord at exactly the right time.
- Incorporate arpeggios, upward scales, downward scales, chord-based intervals, appoggiaturas, etc., to make your playing as interesting as you can.
- Learn transitions from one “home” position to another. During these transitions, the “home” fret changes during a single sequence.

## 3 The Steps in Detail

### 3.1 Picking Songs

This method only works if the songs are sufficiently complex. Typical I-IV-V songs won't really work. I try to find songs that contain most of the major and minor chords in a key, along with 7<sup>th</sup> and others.

The songs should be a decent length and should not have long instrumental/lead passages. You're the one playing lead, so long leads will conflict with hearing yourself. I prefer vocals, since I can contrast what I'm doing to what the vocalist is singing.

Try to find songs in a variety of keys. Gradually expand your repertoire of "comfortable" keys.

### 3.2 Learning Melodies in Various Positions

The ultimate source of all improvisation is the melody. You must first learn the melody for the song, typically in the "open" position (unless it's in a key like Eb).

Then move that knowledge up a few frets. For example, assume you have a song in 'C' (or Am). From the open position, move to having the index finger rooted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret. Learn the melody there. Then move to having the index finger on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret, then the 7<sup>th</sup> fret. If you have a cutaway guitar, you can then go up to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret.

Next, learn to play the chords of the song in each of those position, whenever possible. You may have to play a chord that's one or two frets above or below your new "home" position.

### 3.3 Repetition, Repetition, Repetition

Now comes the hard part.

Start at the open position and play the melody notes, but intersperse those notes with notes from the current chord or scale. Most of these notes will be "linkage"; that is, interior transition notes moving upward or downward toward the next melody note.

The possible acceptable interior notes are:

- from the current chord
- from the current scale
- from the next chord.

**You should play a note on every eighth note, when possible; if not, then on every quarter note for certain.**

After you've done this several times, you will naturally find yourself inventing new lines that fit with the song.

### 3.4 Timing Critical Notes

When an improvised note is struck that fits really well with the current moment in the song, I call that a "money" note. It's what the audience will notice and remember, and it is the core of good improvisation.

My “baroque” method is designed to give you many, many opportunities to discover ways to approach the “money” notes from a variety of lead-in notes.

Good “money” notes are usually from the melody or from an interesting voice (single note) in the current chord. For example, if it’s a minor chord, the most interesting note is the interior 3<sup>rd</sup>, since that is what makes the chord minor. If it’s a 7<sup>th</sup>, the flatted 7<sup>th</sup> is a good money note. This approach works for advanced chords like 9ths, augmented chords, etc.

It is vital that your money note be struck at just the right moment. **Since you’re playing *something* on every eighth note in the song, the challenge is to move to the money note in a way that sounds natural.**

Over time, you’ll find various “figures” that allow you to hit notes “on the money”.

### 3.5 Linking Positions

Once you know melody in more than one home position, try to find ways to “link” (migrate to) another home position and then back again. Sometimes you can “walk” between positions using simple fingering changes, but, at other times, you will need to slide up or down on the fretboard.

The real challenge is how to do this musically, such that the notes you’re using during the linkage section are just as musically relevant as the other notes you’re playing.

### 3.6 Adding Variety

Variety is key in improvisation. Once you move beyond the melody, you can add:

- arpeggios,
- pairs of notes based on intervening (but not always written) chords,
- upward scales,
- downward scales,
- position changes,
- interval scales (skipping some notes),
- “quoting” from other melody passages or even other songs.

One of my favorite ways to add variety is to play an alternative musical line “alongside” the melody. Here are some basic approaches to this:

- Play a line that mimics the timing and intervals of the melody, but is a third or a sixth above or below the melody.
- Invert the movement of the melody by descending when the melody rises and vice-versa.
- Based on the melody’s timing, play short two- and three-note patterns in sequence that emphasize the melody’s movement but intersperse additional notes, usually a third or a sixth from the melody.

### 3.7 Adding Transitions

Another well-used technique is to “signal” a coming chord change by introducing notes from the approaching chord in your improvisation.

## 4 Moving on to Real Improvisation

What I call “real” improvisation is a stage where you build a complete musical alternative to the melody “on the fly”.

### 4.1 Basic Requirements

This stage requires that you be able to hit melody and “money” notes from several directions. This necessitates having the versatility to perform intervals from almost any note to any other note. Some of the skills used in this stage are:

- Jumping octaves.
- Linking octaves; that is, migrating in a key from notes centered in one octave to notes centered in a higher or lower octave. I also call these “walking” scales, since the home position (lowest fret or index finger fret) changes during a single sequence.
- Adding chromatics (notes not in the key) so as to “jazz up” your musical line. These “accidentals” will usually walk up (like F -> F# -> G) or walk down, or will quickly introduce the coming tones with a single note.
- Creating lines of double-stops (two simultaneous notes) that are a third or sixth apart and reference the melody, directly or indirectly.
- Adding partial chord “interior” transitions using triads or double-stops. For example, if a song has the progression C -> F -> G7, I will often play notes (or double-stops or triads) that “hint” at C -> Dm -> Em -> F -> F# -> G7.

### 4.2 Improvisation is Composition

At its core, good improvisation is actually composition. When you’ve played along with a song you know well, you will often find that you “file away” nice sounding “licks” and note passages. After that, you will soon be creating whole alternative lines in your head.

In other words, improvisation doesn’t mean making up an entirely new accompaniment every time. Instead, good players will have a “stockpile” of interesting alternative possibilities for any point in a song. The actual improvisation produced then becomes a selection of these “stockpiled” alternatives linked by newly-minted brief passages.