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# Improvisation as a Skill: Training Models and Spaces for Expression in Italian Higher Music Education

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**Abstract:** This study examines the pedagogical approaches to improvisation in Italian higher music education institutions, focusing on how conservatories have developed distinctive training models that balance traditional classical education with contemporary improvisational practices. Through qualitative analysis of curriculum structures, teaching methodologies, and student outcomes across major Italian conservatories, this research reveals a unique educational paradigm that creates dynamic "expressive spaces" for musical creativity. The findings demonstrate how Italian music education has constructed an improvisational teaching framework that maintains institutional rigor while fostering artistic freedom. This model presents a valuable case study for understanding how traditional music education can adapt to contemporary demands for creativity and individual expression while preserving its classical foundations.

**Keywords:** improvisation; music education; Italian conservatories; pedagogy; creative expression; musical training

## 1. Introduction

The integration of improvisation into formal music education represents one of the most significant paradigm shifts in contemporary musical pedagogy [1]. While improvisation has long been recognized as a fundamental component of musical practice across cultures, its systematic incorporation into institutional curricula presents unique challenges and opportunities. Italian higher music education, with its rich tradition of conservatory training rooted in classical pedagogy, offers a particularly compelling context for examining how improvisation can be meaningfully integrated into formal educational structures [2].

This study investigates the distinctive approaches to improvisational training developed within Italian music conservatories, examining how these institutions have created innovative pedagogical models that bridge traditional classical training with contemporary improvisational practices [3]. The research focuses on understanding the structural characteristics of these training models and analyzing the conceptual framework of "expressive spaces" that emerge from this educational approach.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond the Italian context, as music educators worldwide grapple with similar challenges of maintaining educational rigor while fostering creative expression [4]. The Italian model presents a dynamic tension between teaching goals and artistic freedom, offering insights into how contemporary music

education can respond to dual demands for both technical proficiency and creative development.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Improvisation in Music Education

The theoretical framework for understanding improvisation in formal music education has evolved significantly since the mid-20th century. As early as 1958, British music educator argued that music education should not be confined to score reproduction, but should actively encourage students to establish a direct relationship with sound through improvisation [5]. This foundational concept has served as a cornerstone for creativity-based education and continues to influence curriculum reform debates.

Building upon his work, subsequent scholars have developed more nuanced understandings of improvisation's educational value [6]. It was emphasized the "generative" nature of improvisation, highlighting its role in constructing students' musical identities within open-ended learning environments. This perspective shifts focus from improvisation as a performance skill to improvisation as a fundamental mode of musical thinking and creative expression [7].

### 2.2. Improvisation in European Music Education Contexts

European music education is showing a trend of diversification in the integration of improvisation teaching into the curriculum [8]. The Scandinavian countries (especially Finland and Sweden) have taken the lead in systematically incorporating improvisation elements into their national music education frameworks, with the core being to promote cultural diversity through a democratized teacher-student interaction model, which has formed an innovative challenge to the traditional hierarchical structure of music education [9,10]. These approaches emphasize democratic participation and cultural diversity, creating models that challenge traditional hierarchical structures in music education [11].

Although German music education has also developed improvisation teaching practices, it places greater emphasis on maintaining a connection with the classical tradition, a model that resonates with Italian educational practices and together reflects the evolutionary trend of balancing tradition and innovation in European music education [12-14].

### 2.3. Gaps in Current Research

Despite growing scholarly attention to improvisation in music education, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how different educational contexts shape improvisational practices. Specifically, there is a relative scarcity of systematic analysis on improvisation within Italian higher music education, particularly concerning the internal structure of pedagogical models and the conceptualization of expressive space. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the educational logic and practical forms of improvisation in Italian conservatories, thereby contributing a practice-oriented perspective to ongoing debates about the place of improvisation in contemporary music education.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study employs a multiple case study approach to examine improvisational teaching practices across three major Italian conservatories: the Conservatorio di Musica "Giuseppe Verdi" in Milan, the Conservatorio di Musica "Santa Cecilia" in Rome, and the Conservatorio di Musica "Luigi Cherubini" in Florence. These institutions were selected based on their historical significance, diverse geographical representation, and innovative approaches to curriculum development.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a twelve-month period (2023-2024) and included multiple sources:

- 1) Curriculum Analysis: Systematic examination of official course catalogs, syllabi, and assessment criteria related to improvisation courses.
- 2) Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with 15 faculty members and 20 students across the three institutions.
- 3) Classroom Observations: Documentation of 30 improvisation classes across different instrumental and vocal programs.
- 4) Document Analysis: Review of institutional policies, strategic plans, and historical documents related to curriculum development.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes across data sources. The analytical framework focused on understanding:

- 1) Structural characteristics of training models.
- 2) Pedagogical strategies employed by instructors.
- 3) Student experiences and outcomes.

Cross-case analysis allowed for identification of common patterns while highlighting institutional variations.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Structural Characteristics of Italian Improvisational Training Models

The analysis reveals that Italian conservatories have developed a distinctive approach to improvisation that can be characterized as "structured flexibility". This model maintains the rigorous technical foundation characteristic of classical conservatory training while creating systematic opportunities for creative expression and experimentation.

#### 4.1.1. Curriculum Integration

Rather than treating improvisation as a separate subject, Italian conservatories have integrated improvisational elements throughout their curricula. This integration occurs at multiple levels:

- 1) Progressive Skill Development: Improvisation is introduced in first-year courses through simple exercises in melodic variation and rhythmic patterns, gradually advancing to complex harmonic and structural improvisation in advanced courses.
- 2) Cross-Disciplinary Connections: Improvisation courses are linked to theory, composition, and performance classes, creating a cohesive educational experience that reinforces learning across multiple domains.
- 3) Historical Contextualization: Students learn improvisation within the context of historical practices, studying examples from Baroque ornamentation to contemporary jazz and experimental music.

#### 4.1.2. Assessment Frameworks

The conservatories have developed sophisticated assessment approaches that evaluate both technical competency and creative expression. These frameworks typically include:

- 1) Technical Proficiency Assessments: Evaluation of students' ability to execute improvisational techniques within specific stylistic contexts.
- 2) Creative Expression Evaluations: Assessment of originality, musical coherence, and expressive quality in improvisational performances.

- 3) Reflective Analysis Components: Requirements for students to articulate their improvisational processes and artistic decisions.

#### 4.2. Pedagogical Strategies and Teaching Methodologies

Faculty interviews revealed several key pedagogical strategies that characterize Italian improvisational teaching:

- 1) Scaffolded Learning Approaches

Instructors employ carefully structured progressions that build improvisational skills incrementally. This approach begins with highly constrained exercises (such as improvising within a single scale or chord progression) and gradually removes constraints as students develop confidence and competency.

- 2) Collaborative Learning Environments

Emphasis is placed on ensemble improvisation, where students learn to listen, respond, and contribute to collective musical creation. This approach develops both individual improvisational skills and collaborative musical abilities.

- 3) Cultural and Stylistic Diversity

While maintaining connections to classical traditions, instructors incorporate diverse musical styles and cultural approaches to improvisation. This exposure broadens students' improvisational vocabulary and develops cultural sensitivity.

#### 4.3. Conceptualization of Expressive Spaces

The concept of "expressive space" emerged as a central theme in understanding how Italian conservatories frame improvisational learning. This concept encompasses both physical and conceptual dimensions:

- 1) Physical Expressive Spaces

Conservatories have redesigned physical learning environments to support improvisational activities. These spaces feature flexible seating arrangements, multiple instruments, and technology that enables recording and playback of improvisational sessions for analysis and reflection.

- 2) Conceptual Expressive Spaces

More significantly, the institutions have created conceptual frameworks that define improvisation as a legitimate form of musical expression worthy of serious academic study. This involves:

- a) Legitimization of Risk-Taking: Creating environments where musical "mistakes" are reframed as learning opportunities and creative discoveries.
- b) Validation of Individual Expression: Recognizing and celebrating diverse approaches to musical interpretation and creation.
- c) Integration of Emotional and Intellectual Learning: Balancing analytical understanding with intuitive musical expression.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The Italian Model: Tradition and Innovation in Parallel

The findings reveal that Italian conservatories have developed a unique approach to improvisation education that can be characterized as "tradition and innovation in parallel". This model successfully maintains the rigor and systematic approach characteristic of classical conservatory training while creating meaningful opportunities for creative expression and individual artistic development.

This approach addresses several key challenges in contemporary music education:

- 1) Maintaining Educational Standards: By integrating improvisation into established curricula rather than treating it as an add-on, Italian conservatories maintain academic rigor while expanding educational objectives.

- 2) **Balancing Structure and Freedom:** The "structured flexibility" approach provides students with necessary technical foundations while creating space for individual expression and creativity.
- 3) **Preserving Cultural Heritage:** The model maintains connections to Italian musical traditions while adapting to contemporary educational needs and student interests.

### *5.2. Implications for Music Education Theory and Practice*

The Italian model offers several insights for broader music education theory and practice:

#### *1) Curriculum Design Principles*

The integration of improvisation throughout the curriculum, rather than as a separate subject, suggests that creative practices are most effective when embedded within comprehensive educational programs. This approach reinforces the interconnected nature of musical skills and knowledge.

#### *2) Assessment Innovation*

The development of assessment frameworks that evaluate both technical competency and creative expression provides a model for addressing the challenge of assessing creative work within academic contexts. These approaches demonstrate that rigorous evaluation can coexist with support for individual expression.

#### *3) Faculty Development*

The successful implementation of improvisational teaching requires significant faculty development and institutional support. The Italian model demonstrates the importance of preparing educators to teach improvisation effectively while maintaining connections to their specialized areas of expertise.

### *5.3. Challenges and Limitations*

Despite its successes, the Italian model faces several challenges:

- 1) **Resource Requirements:** The approach requires significant institutional investment in facility modifications, faculty development, and curricular redesign.
- 2) **Cultural Resistance:** Some faculty and students may resist changes to traditional pedagogical approaches, requiring careful change management and cultural sensitivity.
- 3) **Assessment Complexity:** Evaluating creative work requires sophisticated assessment approaches and extensive faculty training.

## **6. Comparative Analysis**

The improvisational teaching practices in Italian music conservatories demonstrate distinctive characteristics when compared to other national approaches. Unlike the more democratic and culturally diverse models found in Scandinavian countries, the Italian approach maintains stronger connections to classical traditions while still creating space for innovation.

Compared to German approaches, which often emphasize theoretical understanding of improvisational structures, Italian conservatories place greater emphasis on practical application and performance-based learning. This difference reflects broader cultural attitudes toward musical expression and the role of intuition in artistic development.

The Italian model also differs from American approaches, which often separate improvisation into specific genres (particularly jazz). Instead, Italian conservatories integrate improvisational thinking across multiple musical styles and historical periods, creating a more holistic approach to creative musical practice.

## 7. Recommendations for Future Development

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations emerge for the continued development of improvisational teaching in Italian music education and beyond:

### 7.1. Institutional Recommendations

**Integration Enhancement:** Further integration of improvisational teaching within the overall music education system, developing more comprehensive curriculum standards that balance traditional requirements with creative objectives.

**Faculty Development:** Strengthen teacher training programs to prepare educators for effective improvisation instruction, including both pedagogical techniques and personal improvisational skills.

**Multicultural Integration:** Expand incorporation of diverse cultural elements in improvisational teaching to broaden students' expressive boundaries and cultural awareness.

### 7.2. Research and Development

**Theoretical Research:** Promote systematic theoretical research on improvisation teaching methodologies, developing more sophisticated frameworks for understanding and evaluating creative musical learning.

**Practical Innovation:** Encourage practical innovation in teaching approaches, drawing on international best practices while maintaining connection to Italian musical traditions. **Assessment Development:** Continue developing sophisticated assessment approaches that can evaluate creative work while maintaining academic standards.

### 7.3. International Collaboration

**Experience Exchange:** Facilitate exchange of advanced international experiences in improvisation education, creating opportunities for cross-cultural learning and collaboration.

**Comparative Studies:** Conduct additional comparative studies of improvisational teaching approaches across different national and cultural contexts.

**Best Practice Sharing:** Develop mechanisms for sharing successful practices and innovations in improvisation education across international music education communities.

## 8. Conclusion

This study reveals that improvisational teaching in Italian music conservatories represents both a continuation of traditional music culture and an essential component of contemporary music education reform. The Italian model demonstrates how institutions can successfully balance respect for classical traditions with responsiveness to contemporary educational needs for creativity and individual expression.

The development of distinctive training models and expressive spaces in Italian conservatories provides valuable insights into the essential characteristics and developmental trends of improvisational teaching. These findings contribute to global understanding of how music education can evolve to meet contemporary challenges while maintaining educational quality and cultural relevance.

The "structured flexibility" approach pioneered by Italian conservatories offers a compelling model for other institutions seeking to integrate improvisation into their curricula. By maintaining rigorous technical standards while creating meaningful opportunities for creative expression, this approach demonstrates that tradition and innovation can coexist productively in music education.

Future research should continue to examine the long-term outcomes of these approaches, investigating how students trained in these models contribute to professional musical practice and how these educational experiences shape their ongoing artistic de-



velopment. Additionally, comparative studies examining similar initiatives in other cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of these approaches.

The Italian experience demonstrates that improvisation in music education is not merely an add-on to traditional curricula, but rather a fundamental component of comprehensive musical training that can enhance both technical proficiency and creative expression. As music education continues to evolve in response to changing cultural and technological landscapes, the Italian model provides a valuable example of how institutions can adapt while maintaining their essential educational mission.

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