



10 Improvisation Games for Ensembles

Steve Treseler

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About Steve



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Steve Treseler is a Seattle-based saxophonist, teacher, and author. *DownBeat* calls his music “beautifully crafted ensemble pieces—whether free, through-composed, or somewhere in between.” The Kenny Wheeler Tribute Project Steve leads with renowned trumpeter Ingrid Jensen was featured on NPR’s *Jazz Night in America*.

Steve is on faculty at Seattle Pacific University and leads creative music workshops across the U.S. He is the founder of Game Symphony Workshop, which helps musicians create and perform original music. College jazz programs across the country use Steve’s book, *The Living Jazz Tradition: A Creative Guide to Improvisation and Harmony* (CMA Press, 2014).

[Reserve a free digital copy](#) of Steve’s forthcoming book *Creativity Triggers for Musicians* at <http://stevetres.com/>

Introduction

Throughout a decade of leading creative music workshops, I've found that musical games provide an effective and engaging introduction to improvisation. Theater games help actors build trust and generate new material, and musicians can experience the same benefits.

I'd like to share to ten of my favorite games and activities that help musicians:

Ease Fears

Improvisation is the source of paralyzing fear for many musicians, and collaborative games ease fears about the creative process. The novelty, unpredictability, and attainable challenges drive our attention into the present.

Build Community

The prevailing methods of jazz improvisation focus on solo improvisation, which is challenging to teach in large ensembles. Creative games engage everyone in the ensemble and help musicians build trust and camaraderie. This gives players the confidence to step up as soloists later on.

Unlock Creativity

Through musical games, we experience the creative practices of experimentation, play, risk, and self-imposed limitations. Although some of the games are silly, the practices are a gateway to creative chamber music, jazz improvisation, composition, and songwriting.

When we refer to various activities of life as “games,” we do not mean to imply that these activities are frivolous or make no difference. . . Naming your activities as a game breaks their hold on you and puts you in charge. Just look carefully at the cover of the box, and if the rules do not light up your life, put it away, take out another one you like better, and play the new game wholeheartedly. Remember, it's all invented.

– **Roz Zander**, *The Art of Possibility*

The purpose of musical games is not to generate a polished product, but to make musicians feel safe, adventuresome, and confident in the creative process.

– **W. A. Mathieu**, composer, author of *Harmonic Experience*

1. Ribbon Game

From W.A. Mathieu

- Arrange the ensemble in an arc or circle
- Designate a starting musician to play/sing a single note (any pitch)
- Moving clockwise around the circle, musicians take turns playing single notes, weaving together an improvised melody
- Continue through several cycles

Variations

• Check In

Each musician gives a spoken introduction and then plays a single note that expresses how they are feeling in the moment

• Ordered Cartoon Trades (from John Zorn's game piece *Cobra*)

Ribbon game with silly or novelty sounds

• Pulse

Ribbon game in tempo, each musician plays a quarter note

• Two Notes

Pulse ribbon game, each musician plays two eighth notes

• Morphing Chorale

Pulse ribbon game, each musician enters at forte and gradually fades out so four to five musicians are playing together

• Timed

Set a stopwatch and time how fast the ensemble can complete one (or several) cycles of a ribbon melody

2. THX

A musical impression of the THX trailer from the movies.

- Begin with soft noodling/warm up sounds and gradually transition to a fortissimo concert D over 20-30 seconds
- The noodling sounds and concert D should overlap in the middle
- Gradual crescendo throughout

3. We Are the Score

from Kaley Lane Eaton, composer and Game Symphony Workshop facilitator

- Arrange the ensemble in an arc or circle
- Musicians may choose to sit, stand, or sit with a raised hand
- Each musician represents one beat of a musical score:
 - Seated musicians are quarter notes
 - Standing musicians are two eighth notes
 - Musicians with a raised hand are quarter rests
- Designate a starting musician
- Count off a tempo, and everyone claps the rhythm in unison, visually scanning clockwise around the circle
- Continue through several cycles
- Play/sing the rhythm in unison, or with a predetermined set of pitches

Variations

- Musicians who sit on the floor are three eighth note triplets
- Musicians may change positions/rhythmic values in the middle of the game

4. Musical Signature

Part 1

- Ask each musician to speak their full name while clapping the syllables
- Accent the strong syllables (ba-RACK o-BA-ma)
- Conduct or drum a pulse, and ask one musician to repeatedly clap their name
- Add musicians one at a time

Part 2

- Ask each musician to compose a musical signature: a melody to go with the rhythmic framework
- Accented syllables should be the highest pitches of the phrase
- Conduct or drum a pulse, and ask one musician to repeatedly play their signature
- Add musicians one at a time

5. Free Conducting

From Walter Thompson's Soundpainting (Shapeline gesture)

- Ask for a volunteer conductor
- The ensemble musically responds to every motion, gesture, and facial expression of the conductor
- The conductor can dance, pantomime, and use props.

6. Guess the Animal

From Jeffrey Agrell's *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*

- Divide into groups of 4-6 musicians
- Each group chooses an animal to express musically and rehearses for 3-5 minutes
- Each group performs their animal for the rest of the ensemble
- The audience tries to guess the animal

Variations

- **Guess the Machine**
- **Guess the Emotion**

7. Doodle Score

- A volunteer has 15 seconds to draw a picture or abstract doodle on a white board
- A soloist or small group improvises a musical portrait of the doodle

Variation

- **Graphic Score Telephone**
 - Draw on a sheet of paper hidden from the audience
 - During the performance, ask another volunteer to draw a new doodle based on the music
 - The soloist/ensemble performs another improvisation based on the new doodle
 - Repeat the above steps
 - Compare all the scores

8. Pentatonic Ostinato

- Teach the ensemble a pentatonic scale (scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, 6)
- Conduct or drum a pulse
- One player improvises a short ostinato (continually repeating phrase) using the pentatonic scale
- One at a time, players enter with their own ostinatos (no predetermined order)
- Ask players to use a variety of rhythms, phrase lengths, and registers
- Once everyone in the ensemble has entered, players drop out one at a time

Variations

- Players can gradually alter and develop their ostinatos
- Ask soloist(s) to improvise over the ostinato
- Change keys on cue

9. Channel Surfing

- Give a volunteer conductor an imaginary remote control
- Each musician is a T.V. channel and plays unaccompanied when directed by the remote
- Only one musician plays at a time
- You may need to describe what life was like before YouTube and Netflix

Variation

- Two conductors and remote controls

10. Affect Symphony

From W.A. Mathieu

- Choose 4-6 performers and a conductor
- Each performer chooses an emotional state to express musically (or take suggestions from the audience)
- The conductor cues entrances and cut offs for each musician
- Encourage the conductor to experiment with monologues, duets, and larger scenes

More Free Resources

See a few of these games in action at <http://gamesymphonyworkshop.com/>

[Reserve a free digital copy](#) of my forthcoming book *Creativity Triggers for Musicians*

Read my [Creative Music Blog](#)

Game Symphony Workshop

This 2-3 day workshop helps musicians collaboratively create and perform original music.

Participants experience musical adaptations of theater games, Soundpainting, text setting, creative chamber music, film scoring and more.

A team of facilitators leads workshops for adult and student musicians.



Visit <http://gamesymphonyworkshop.com/> to learn more