

Annual Meeting Report  
Guest Speaker: Jim Grondin  
Improv Session

The guest speaker for the 2016 Annual Meeting was Jim Grondin, the husband of SAI board member Emilie Grondin, and a professional jazz musician and teacher (bio below). His primary instrument is saxophone, with proficiency in multiple woodwind instruments, and he led this session on flute. Participants in the session included Liz Efroymsen, Emilie Grondin, and a high school student of Emilie's on cello, and Debbie Barker, Sarah Pearce, Maria Mastropaolo, Diana Hummel, Jillian Chrisman, Emily Thompson, and Meghan King on violin.

Jim began the session with a series of exercises designed to start from the beginning with improvisation.

1. Play one-octave scales in unison (we played D Major and D chromatic scales)
2. Repeat scales over an open 5th drone (in this case, D and A). Jim used a pre-recorded track on his computer, hooked up to a large speaker. This could also be done by having some players play their open strings as a drone for D Major, etc.
3. Take a moment for each player to experiment with creating melodies using these scales, simultaneously with the others (sounding somewhat cacophonous, but useful for playing around without feeling exposed). Continue the open fifth drone.
4. Use call-and-response to go around the room as follows: the first player improvises a short melody ending on an unresolved note, the second player improvises a melody that answers and resolves the "question." The third player continues with a "call" to which the fourth player responds, and so on. The open fifth drone is continued throughout.
5. Add a regular beat under the drone (again Jim used a pre-recorded track). Repeat the call-and-response around the room again.
6. Add a chord progression to the beat. Jim used a pre-recorded track of the 12-bar blues progression. Improvise around the room over this progression, with each player playing over a regular number of measures.

Following these exercises, Jim introduced us to the music of Jamey Abersold, an Indiana jazz musician and educator (born 1939 in New Albany, IN, where he still lives). Abersold has published 133 "Play-A-Long" books, a series of books with recorded tracks and written out tunes followed by open measures showing the scale and/or chords over which to improvise for additional choruses of the piece. Jim showed us Vol. II, one of the easier books for beginners, that features short pieces by Abersold written out in a number of different clefs for different instruments.

The first sheet music selection Jim distributed for us to play was "Milestones" by Miles Davis, from Abersold's Vol. 50, *The Magic of Miles Davis*. First, the group played the tune in unison several times with the accompaniment CD. Once the form and progression was in our ears, then we played solos around the room several times, each player improvising over four measures. It was during this song that we began to really experiment with our own ideas and

style of playing and it was fascinating to hear each person's individual playing and creativity emerge. Jim's beginning exercises working gradually up to these skills had helped establish a non-judgmental environment, with enough structure to feel confident, but enough freedom to make mistakes and find ways to resolve them.

The session followed with another Miles Davis piece, "So What" (also from his album *Milestones*). The players divided into two groups, one playing the melody, and the other playing the two note "So what" response. This piece allowed Jim to introduce the concept of swing 8ths, where the melody is written in steady 8th notes, but played in an unequal long-short rhythm. He also explained that in this case, string players may use bowings opposite to their usual. So, the pickup note would be played on a down bow, with an up bow on the beat. This bowing pattern facilitated a natural sense of swinging (unequal) eighth notes. There were other instances within this piece that were good examples of jazz style and articulations, such as playing quarter notes short and detached. After playing the entire tune through several times, then players took turns improvising over the progression.

Another concept Jim discussed as being used in this piece was the use of modal scales. In "So What," the scales given to improvise with were marked by Abersold as Bm and Cm, but the intervals of the scales were not the Dorian (natural minor) mode, but the Phrygian mode, another alternative for "minor" scales in jazz.

We played through two more selections: an easy Abersold piece from his Vol. 2, and then a quick taste of Bossa Nova with a piece from Abersold's Vol. 31.

Finally, Jim recommended an audio-video editing software, AVS, that he used to transpose the accompaniment CDs into string friendly keys. He highly recommended this software for its features and very affordable price. It can be found at <http://www.avs4you.com>.

The Suzuki Association of Indiana would like to thank Emilie Grondin for hosting the annual meeting and Jim for so generously holding the workshop and donating his speaker fee back to the organization.