

THE IMPROVISING LUTENIST

Gilbert Isbin

Foreword

Improvising is like composing; no matter how much theoretical knowledge you absorb, imagination is essential.

This book is written to help you improvise in a contemporary way on the lute.

Every musician can learn to improvise. You just need to learn and practice the right tools.

Improvisation is not intimidating at all !!

Each chapter focuses on a different improvisational approach.

Play through the examples at your own tempo but don't feel as though you have to memorise them. This is not necessary nor desirable. When you feel ready, start practicing improvising using the exercises given in the book. At first you will probably not be playing in strict time but you will be able to maintain a steady tempo as you become more experienced and confident.

In every chapter there is a 'Your turn' section, following the examples. Here you are learning the tools of improvisation and it is important to invest time when it is 'Your turn'. The aim is always to create your own improvisations but if this seems too difficult you could begin by composing some ideas on paper.

The book will not deal in great detail with theoretical aspects. These can be found in thousands of books that have already been published.

'The Improvising Lutenist' is written with the lute at hand and is focussed on improvising in a contemporary way on scales and modes, grounds and chord progressions.

It is written for the six-course renaissance lute but if you have a lute with more courses you can just be creative with the additional basses.

A big thanks to Stuart Walsh for proofreading and his interesting, stimulating suggestions and to Denys Stephens and Chris Goodwin for their interest in making this course available on the UK Lute Society site.

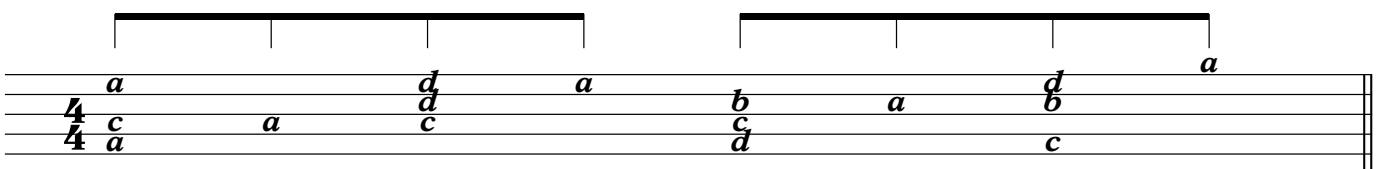
I hope this book will be stimulating, rewarding and enjoyable.

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BREAKING DOWN THE C MAJOR SCALE

In this chapter we will explore the fretboard using the C Major Scale as it is played most easily on the lute. This scale will function as a basis for all other scales/modes that we will use.

The aim of this book is to help create melodic lines on the spot.

You will be encouraged to use adjacent and non-adjacent courses in your improvisations and in this way (as you will see in the examples) you will discover interesting intervals and you can free yourself from relying on simple, scale-like passages.

Improvisation means playing in the moment, so don't just memorise the examples or play them as licks as this has nothing to do with improvisation. You are free to write down your creations on paper, of course, and use them for composing purposes or as a starting point for further explorations.

THE C MAJOR SCALE

Notations

do re mi fa sol la si do

C D E F G A B C

b before any tone = lower that tone by a half step (one fret's distance).

= raise that tone with a half step.

Position or area playing

In the second position the scales lay, with some exceptions, within the area covered by the four left hand fingers when the first finger is at the second fret. Later on we will concentrate on higher positions.

As we want to play all the notes of the C Major scale we can reach in the 2nd position we will start on course 6, on the G

Ascending

1

Descending

2

Scale tones

The notes of a scale can be numbered according to their interval.

Look for these intervals on the fretboard and sing them while you are plucking them.

1 2 or 9 3 4 or 11 5 6 or 13 7

C D E F G A B

Intervals greater than an octave are called compound intervals. (9,11,13)

Find the intervals on the fretboard.

Playing what you hear in your mind

When improvising you should be able to hear the pitches in your mind and find them on the fretboard. To do this you should practise singing (or humming) every scale note. Each note has a unique intervallic relationship to a root note.

Simply put : the root note or tonic (1), the major 3rd (3), perfect 4th(4), perfect 5th (5), major 6th (6) are considered as consonant. 'Consonant' is associated with sweetness, pleasantness. The major 2nd (2) and major 7th (7) are considered as 'dissonant' (harsh, less pleasant). It's up to your personal taste which intervals you like or dislike.

Exercise

Play first the tonic (root note) and then sing it. Then pluck a scale note and sing it. (you might sing the note's name or you could just hum the sound). Sing first the 1,3 and 5 as they are part of a C major triad. Then we continue with the other consonant intervals to end with the dissonant ones. Listen to the different sonic colors.

Let's start with the tonic or root note.

Sing a C while sustaining the C (as a sort of drone) and listen to it's specific tonic colour. Then sing the root without plucking it. Then play the C and listen to check if you were singing correctly.

Root or octave

Major 3rd

Perfect 5th

Perfect 4th or 11th**Major 6th or 13th**

15

Major 2th or 9th**Major 7th**

19

Breaking down the C Major scale

As you become familiar with the available notes on each course try to play interesting melodic phrases that are not just based on stepwise motion.

Creating lines from notes on non-adjacent courses will help you develop a personal, colourful vocabulary. Try to sing these notes too. You should, with some practice, be able to play what you hear in your mind. Name the intervals.

6st Course only**5th Course only****4th course only**

5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5

3rd course only**2nd course only****1st course only**

6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1

Improvising single note lines on different courses

Try to liberate yourself from a reliance on scale like passages and create interesting melodic lines (and increase your technical ability).

All the following lines in the examples came out of my intuitive sense and not from formulas.

It's not a terrible mistake if you hit a note that is not part of the C Major scale.

Don't stop just play on. Perhaps these 'mistakes' might become a part of your improvising approach.

Limit yourself for now to combinations on courses 1,2,3,4.

Start with the root C followed by melodic lines.

To start, use the following rhythms but if you would like to play a rhythm that is not from the ones specified, feel free to do so.

Musical notation showing three measures of improvisation on different courses. The first measure is in 2/4 time with a single note 'd'. The second measure is in 1/4 time with a single note 'd'. The third measure is in 4/4 time with two notes 'd' and 'd' connected by a slur.

Sustained root and melodic lines on 1 course only

4th course only

Musical notation for the 4th course, starting at measure 22. It shows a sustained root 'a' on the bottom line and melodic lines on the top line. The notes are 'a c', 'c c a a c a', 'a a a c c a c', and 'a a c c'. The word 'etc' is written at the end.

3rd course only

Musical notation for the 3rd course, starting at measure 26. It shows a sustained root 'a' on the bottom line and melodic lines on the top line. The notes are 'd c d', 'd c c c a', 'c d a d', and 'd a c a c a'. The word 'etc' is written at the end.

2nd course only

Musical notation for the 2nd course, starting at measure 30. It shows a sustained root 'a' on the bottom line and melodic lines on the top line. The notes are 'd a d c a', 'a d c c', 'c d a d a', and 'c d c a d'. The word 'etc' is written at the end.

1st course only

34

etc

Your turn**4th course only****3rd course only**

38

3rd course only**1st course only**

42

Sustained root and melodic lines on different courses**On 4th and 3rd course only**

etc

On 4th and 2nd course only

etc

On 4th and 1st course only

etc

Diagram 1: *f e* | *a c a* | *e f a* | *a e f c*

Diagram 2: *a c a* | *a* | *a c a c* | *a a c a*

On 3rd and 2nd course only

Diagram 1: *d a a d c* | *d a c c a* | *d a c a c* | *d d c c a a*

Diagram 2: *a* | *a* | *a* | *a*

On 3rd and 1st course only

Diagram 1: *e c* | *e a* | *c a e a f* | *a c e*

Diagram 2: *c* | *d c* | *c d* | *a d a d*

Diagram 3: *a* | *a* | *a* | *a*

On 3rd, 2nd and 1st course only

Diagram 1: *d c a* | *d a e a f* | *c a e c* | *d d a c a a*

Diagram 2: *a* | *a* | *a* | *a*

On 4th, 3rd and 2nd course only

Diagram 1: *a d* | *d a c a* | *a a c a d* | *a d d c*

Diagram 2: *a c* | *a c* | *a a* | *a c*

On 4th, 3rd and 1st course only

On 4th, 3rd 2nd and 1st course only

Your turn

On 4th and 3rd course only

On 4th and 2nd course only

49

On 4th and 1st course only

On 3rd and 2nd course only

53

On 3rd and 1st course only

On 3rd, 2nd and 1st course only

57

On 4th, 3rd and 2nd course only

On 4th, 3rd and 1st course only

61

On 4th, 3rd 2nd and 1st course only

65