

10 Improvisation Games for Ensembles



Steve Treseler

Share This

You have permission to share and print this eBook as long as you don't alter the content. The right to sell digital and physical copies is strictly reserved.

Copyright ©2017 Steve Treseler

About Steve



Photo ©[Daniel Sheehan](#)

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

Steve performs and leads creative music workshops across the U.S. He teaches at Seattle Pacific University and is the founder of the [Game Symphony Workshop](#), which helps musicians unlock creativity through group improvisation.

Steve is the author of *The Living Jazz Tradition: A Creative Guide to Improvisation and Harmony* and *Creativity Triggers for Musicians* (available for free at [creativitytriggers.com](#)).

Read Steve’s blog at [creativemusic.blog](#)

Steve is a Conn-Selmer endorsing artist.

Introduction

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*

Theater games help actors build trust and generate new material, and musicians can experience the same benefits. Musical games provide an engaging and effective introduction to the creative practices of experimentation, play, risk, and self-imposed limitations.

Ease Fears

Fear and anxiety are the biggest roadblocks to creative music-making. The fears of being put on the spot, making a mistake, public embarrassment, not knowing what to play, and being judged are related to our fear of social rejection. This fear runs deep in our biology – it activates the same neural alarm system as a physical threat. This is why public speaking or performance can feel so terrifying even though they're not actually dangerous.

Collaborative games and activities solve the anxiety problem in two important ways:

Connection – Community-building activities align the practice of improvisation with our deep-seated need for social connection and acceptance. When we have fun making music with our friends, the fight-or-flight response melts away.

Focus – Attainable and novel challenges drive our focus into the present moment. Too little stimulation leads to boredom, and too much challenge evokes anxiety. Choosing the right game or activity can hit the sweet spot of exhilarating, fully-focused flow. Research shows this level of focus shuts off the brain's inner critic.

Unlock Creativity

Although some of these games are silly, the process is a gateway to deeper creative practices. The experiences can give musicians the experimental mindset and confidence required to dive into solo improvisation, composition, and more.

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 Dr. 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

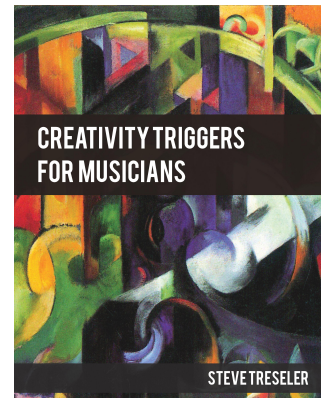
From W. A. Mathieu

- 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

Free Resources

Creativity Triggers for Musicians features non-idiomatic prompts and exercises for individuals and ensembles. Download at creativitytriggers.com.

[Creative Music Blog](#)



Game Symphony Workshop

This multi-day improvisation workshop helps musicians collaboratively create and perform original music. Participants experience musical adaptations of theater games, Soundpainting, text setting, creative prompts, and more. The workshop presents a re-implementable model for learning improvisation.

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

Visit gamesymphonyworkshop.com to learn more.