

TIPS & ADVICE ON SESSION SKILLS

TRINITY
ROCK & POP
2018

EXAMINERS, MUSICIANS AND TEACHERS SHARE THEIR TIPS AND ADVICE ON IMPROVISING AND PLAYBACK

Professional session musicians and artists need to be equipped with a range of listening, sight reading and improvisation skills to be successful in the industry. Our Rock & Pop exams help learners develop these skills through our unique session skills tests: improvising and playback. Here are some tips from professional musicians, teachers and examiners on preparing for this part of the Rock & Pop exam.

BACK TO BASICS

A solid grounding in the basics of musical knowledge makes it easier to be creative with a performance in an appropriate and authentic way:

'Improvising itself is essentially about breaking the rules of music, and once you know the rules and the concepts involved in music, with improvising you can then start to break them.' **Will Franden, bassist**

'What makes the blues sound like the blues? Why does reggae sound different to funk? Being an effective improviser requires not just technical fluency on an instrument or voice, but also an awareness of the note choices, chord voicings, rhythms, phrasing and use of tone that make a given style sound the way it does. Students need to know how to take an initial idea and then develop it in a fluent and creative way that's authentic for the style.' **Steve Gisby, bassist, composer and academic**

'When it comes to working on ear training, there are a couple of ways you can go about practising. One of the ways that I've found most effective is actually sitting down with a piano - you can get apps that can do this

as well - and have someone play intervals for you. The goal is to recognise what the difference in interval is between the notes. By gradually practising that simple test again and again you can develop a quick ear.'

Caleb Wilson, bassist and teacher

BE PREPARED

Preparing for the session skills part of the exam is just as important as preparing for the performance of the three songs:

'As a teacher, I recommend my own students to think of the session skills almost like a fourth song: think about the amount of preparation you put into the songs and dedicate the same amount of time to the session skills.' **Matt Fisher, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and teacher**

'Don't leave the improvising and playback session skills to the last minute! I believe it is important to teach both aspects to students, despite the Rock & Pop exam only requiring one. Both aspects are so important to any performing musician we almost do our students a disservice if we don't allow them to explore both elements. Then for their exam, select the option which is most appropriate for the individual.' **Vicky Matthews, assistant headteacher and singing teacher**

'For playback, always look at the dynamics and articulation details in the 30 seconds prep time before the practice with the track. These can be missed and form part of the marks. Make sure you know to play AFTER the track example, not on top of it.' **Sally Martin Brown, Rock & Pop examiner, singer and teacher**

PIECES OF A PUZZLE

Everything that goes into a performance - sound, technique, delivery - and into a song itself - melody, groove, harmony - should be taken into account when approaching improvising:

'Something I have noticed recently is how the improvising task has really helped to develop an approach. Now I am seeing candidates really think about the sound they are going to use to bring out the style, the techniques associated with that genre and how a part can be developed each time it recurs through a song, so that it is not just the same thing repeated. There is also a much deeper understanding of the actual musical styles, which is great to see.'

Matt Fisher, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and teacher

'A good place to start with learning to improvise is having an understanding of how different musical elements work together: how harmony functions, how melody sits on top of that, and how groove can support it all. The best way to do this is to analyse different pieces of music that you're interested in. So if you're learning a solo, analyse "How do the notes from that solo fit in on top of a song or a set of chord changes? How does the groove then support that? Is he using any extended techniques, any bends?" And then also a good thing to think about is "What is the song about? What's the message of the song?" And how can you relay that, and how can you pick that up and portray that in your own playing?' **Will Franden, bassist**

'The key is to understand the characteristics of whichever styles are appropriate, how to identify their relevance to any accompanying music and then how to fuse these aspects successfully. Often it really is about following your ear and your instincts, but it can also open up a world of exciting new musical ideas.' **JJ Wheeler, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and record label manager**

'When we improvise in the style, we need to ask ourselves some questions for each song we play. What is your role in the groove? How does it fit together with the other elements?' **Paul Trippett, bassist and teacher**

STYLES & GENRES PLAYLISTS

Check out our set of [Spotify playlists](#) exploring the styles and genres that may come up in the session skills part of the exam.

BOOKS, BACKING AND BANDS

Preparing for the sessions skills part of the exam needn't be a solitary exercise. Making the use of resources including books, videos, and backing tracks, or taking it even further and jamming with fellow musicians or thinking about playing in a band, can all enrich the experience and help to improve skills:

'Playing along to a recording is great, and offers the opportunity to learn many things. However, the recording never varies. There are ensemble skills that students need to develop: listening, reacting, adapting, dynamics, tone, timekeeping, and of being aware how their part interacts with others. A question I always put to my students after they've been playing for a while, is whether or not they're in a band. It's interesting how many of them reply "Not yet. I'm going to wait until I'm good enough". There'll always be room for improvement, so get stuck in now!' **Steve Gisby, bassist, composer and academic**

THE ROCK & POP PRACTICE ROOM

Visit trinityrock.com/practice-room to access a wide range of free session skills support resources including videos, articles and example improvising and playback tests.

'A wealth of material is now available in Trinity's Rock & Pop improvisation blog posts and videos, which I would strongly encourage all students and teachers to check out. There are also Rock & Pop Session Skills books for students to practise with, which you can buy on Trinity's online shop. I would also recommend students to continue researching the styles used in the Rock & Pop improvisations - just putting in 'blues guitar' or 'reggae drums' into YouTube for example will bring up a wealth of material that you can use to practise with and learn from' **Matt Fisher, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and teacher**

'Throughout the Rock & Pop syllabus you will find ad-lib markings and, in higher grades, whole improvised sections. When you are thinking about how to approach these, it's very important that they are sympathetic to the style of the song. To get a feel for the style, listen to the original recording and to other songs by the same artist.' **Kate Proudlove, Rock & Pop examiner, teacher, singer and songwriter**

KEEP CALM AND ENJOY YOURSELF

While performing on the spot can be nerve-wracking, it can also be an exciting experience and allow for lots of self-expression. Staying calm and keeping it simple can help to make sure it's a beneficial and enjoyable experience:

'Having been trained as a classical flautist and pianist I found it a very daunting thought that it was possible for a musician just to stand up on stage and improvise, without any musical notation at all - this just seemed impossible to me. However, after many jam sessions, open mic nights, soloing in bands and much wood shedding at home, this is an area I really enjoy. The freedom it can give is exhilarating and exciting, giving the music an edge and keeping it fresh for the musicians who can react differently in each situation, even though the song remains the same.' **Sophie Young, Rock & Pop examiner and musician**

'It is very important to be relaxed, and to have a good sense of the music that you're playing. You need to be aware of what you're doing, but also not be scared to experiment.' **Talia Cohen, singer-songwriter**

'Simplicity is often key. If you can present an idea and make it sit 'in the pocket', this will sound a million times better than rushing into a complex run of notes, which bear little resemblance to the style.' **JJ Wheeler, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and record label manager**

'I tell my students it's like watching a really good film - you find yourself completely engrossed in it and unaware of the time that has elapsed. If you find yourself really in the moment, then you have nailed the solo.' **Sophie Young, Rock & Pop examiner and musician**

'I feel this is a perfect opportunity (as well as the own choice song) for candidates to bring something of themselves into the exam. Again, over the course of a tour, I hear the same improvising backing tracks played back from my computer, but every improvisation is different and has the opportunity to bring something new to the performance.' **Matt Fisher, Rock & Pop examiner, drummer and teacher**

COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS

Improvisation, sight reading and ear training are skills that go hand in hand with each other - being skilled in all three areas will improve employability if the end goal is to become a professional musician:

'These are really important skills, and they crop up all the time. If you're in a studio recording, someone might say to you, we need to fill these 16 bars here, please improvise a solo, or we're adding this new bit in, there's a new riff here, listen and pick it up as quickly as you can because there's never much time.' **Chris Walters, musician and Rock & Pop contributor**

'Sight reading makes you much more employable than just being able to play by ear alone - the two actually work very well in conjunction with each other in terms of work and employability. There are certain gigs when you'll be called to simply just read - they'll give you the chart maybe the day before, or maybe even on the day.' **Ishara Matthews, drummer, singer and songwriter**

'You never know what you're going to get on a session, and you need to be able to improvise, but on the other hand sometimes you need to have a more specific knowledge of theory and be able to read a piece of music off the cuff without having ever seen it before.' **Justin Gartry, session musician**

ACCESS ALL AREAS...

Visit the **Rock & Pop Practice Room** to access a range of other support articles, videos and resources including:

- ⚡ **Producer's Notes:** Printable handouts which look at songs on the Rock & Pop 2018 syllabus.
- ⚡ **Rock & Pop Sessions:** Performances of Rock & Pop 2018 songs by the professionals.
- ⚡ **Demo videos:** Videos looking at specific skills and techniques.
- ⚡ **Improvisation articles:** Articles looking at how to approach improvising in different styles and genres, with example videos.

Visit trinityrock.com/practice-room

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