

IMPROV SOUND

by Craig Rintoul (30+ years exp.)

Part 1

INTRODUCTION TO SOUND IMPROVISING

Welcome to the world of comedy sound improvisation. It can be a lot of fun to do and sound can make the entire show experience deeper, more professional, and comically unexpected.

Yes, doing sound IS improvising. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

BUT to quote the great philosopher Spider-man:

“With great power comes great responsibility”

Improv sound can make a scene better, but it can DESTROY scenes just as easily!

In many ways sound improvising is the opposite of stage improvising. You must be constantly BLOCKING yourself.

Instead of being anchored in “the moment”, you have to project yourself into as many of the different possible future directions the scene may take as possible. But improv moments are fleeting. If you have a great effect or piece of music set to go but the scene veers off somewhere else, you have to be instantly willing to give up your idea and precious sound and continue to try to figure out where the scene is going and what it might need.

The right sound at the right moment can elevate a scene. But the right sound at the wrong moment is just as bad as the wrong sound at the right moment. Your ego will feel bruised if you have had a night of constantly finding a really cool, fun, fitting sound only to have the scenes wander off. Here is the good news. No one but you knows what did NOT get played. What the audience will remember is the amazing way you had the western music come up instantly in a genre roller coaster and then switched like magic to a dark bluesy number when the genre changes to film noir. That is where your ego gets fed!

Part 2- USES OF SOUND-MUSIC

First, a few words about volume. If possible can have your 'tech booth' at the back of house, positioned opposite the stage. This allows you the best vantage to hearing whether the audio is too loud or too soft. If your booth is off to the side, play a bit of music and walk to the back of the house. Close your eyes and listen, try to hold that volume in your memory, then go back to your 'booth' on the side or wherever and compare. This will give you a good baseline. Check levels before the show starts, but remember that the human body makes an excellent sound baffle and the audience can soak up a surprising amount of sound. Watch the players off to the side of the stage for the universal TOO LOUD hand signal of touching an ear and pointing down with their thumb.

Music and sound effects are two very different elements for both players and the Sound Improviser.

As a general rule, the characters on stage HEAR THE SOUND EFFECTS but DO NOT HEAR THE MUSIC. (The exception being a Royal Trumpet Fanfare or something.)

Players sometimes hear the music anyway and call it out to get a cheap laugh. But come on, Mel Brooks did it best in Blazing Saddles as the hero and his horse trotted past Count Basie and his orchestra playing the sweeping western background music. (with apologies to the Muppets “Pigs in SPACE!!”) Bad players will reference it constantly. Like any other gag, it is funny once but tires quickly.

MUSIC

Behind pretty much every scene in every movie or TV show there is background music. It is so omnipresent that most of the time audiences don't consciously hear it. Carefully adding background music to a scene helps make it more three dimensional.

If you have a MUSICAL IMPROVISER working with you, on keyboards, guitar or bagpipes, I suggest that the two of you have a good long talk about who, in general, should play what and when. Good communication during the show is critical. In general, my usual default is to let the Musical Improviser take the lead. Musical Improvisers can do some things better than a Sound Improviser, but if the scene calls for Handel's Hallelujah Chorus sung by a five hundred singers, whisper to the Musical Improviser a quick “I've got this! Stepping on each other happens. But just like on stage, the two of you will learn how to 'share the air'.

Music really shines in games like: Genre Roller-coaster (also known as Continuing Styles), a Scene Three Ways, Scene to Music, Booth Hell, and Long Forms.

In a Scene Three Ways the music has more impact if you don't put anything under the first 'normal' version, but add it to the next ones.

In a Scene to Music, where the actors are silent but change moods how they move on stage, I suggest alternating with the Music Improviser. This allows for a greater range and contrast for the players to work with.

Music also activates the audience's imagination. It can ESTABLISH location, time of day, genre or even mood.

If the stage is in empty, preferably in a black or brown-out, start appropriate background music right away. I sometimes signal the LIGHTING IMPROVISER to hold off bringing the lights back up. This not only sets the scene but gives the players a few more precious seconds before they have to enter. For example a Western scene can begin with a raucous saloon piano tune. (This also offers a gag which allows a bad guy to shoot the invisible piano player. GUNSHOT-PIANO CRASH-THUD ON FLOOR)

If the scene is already underway very slowly fade the appropriate music in, I call this 'sneaking'. Most of the audience will not consciously hear it because we are so used to background music in film and TV.

Music can but used to PUNCTUATE SOME CHANGE on stage. For example in a Soap Opera scene, if a character makes a sudden, big, dramatic confession like, “I am your long lost twin brother!” you can add a cheesy organ music sting. Or if a mad killer is sneaking up on victim, adding the frantic,

high-pitched, screeching music as they attack is both dramatic and comedic.

Music can HEIGHTEN EMOTION. If characters are exploring a scary place, the right music behind them can intensify the fear manyfold. Drama is all about building tension and releasing it. Music does this brilliantly I also find that if there is mood music underscoring, then the players are more liable to shut-up and act rather than becoming a talking head.

TALKING HEADS become much more interesting with music behind them. If the scene is a politician giving an election speech, stirring music underscoring her or him really makes it 'pop'. Great players will match their cadence to the music. If the stage improvisers have heard your version of Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" before, they can hit their climax as the music does. And when isn't a simultaneous climax a great thing!

Part 3-USES OF SOUND-SOUND EFFECTS

SOUND EFFECTS AKA FX OR SFX

Unlike music, which the Stage Improvisers hear, but their characters do not, sound effects are HEARD BY BOTH.

Sound Improvising is like wielding THOR'S HAMMER. Mjölnir, as my fellow geeks already know, was the most feared weapon in Norse mythology. It could destroy mountains. Sound Effects are powerful too, but they can also destroy scenes! Reckless use of Sound Effects detracts from the audience's suspension of disbelief instead of enhancing the improv experience.

SCENE SETTING

If the scene is going to be set at the beach, bring up waves and seagulls and anything else suggestive of a beach. Leave the sound up until the players are ready to talk, then lower it into the background. Keep it there, but be sure NOT to impede the improvisers' ability to be heard. If a scene setting sound effect is about to run out, find another version (or a copy of the first one) and slowly mix that with the first to continue and lengthen the effect. Some Sound Effects can be looped and if the computer program allows, that loop can run on and on.

CHEKHOV'S GUN (OR THE MUCH LESSER KNOWN CHEKHOV'S CHICKEN)

Anton, not 'Star Trek's' Lt. Pavel Chekhov, famously wrote, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired." BE READY. Sound matching the stage action is magic to an audience.

What if there is a gun, but the improvisers forget about it? The players may have forgotten, but you can bet the audience has not. If the scene is going downhill, FIRE THE DAMN GUN! Yes, this startles the improvisers, but you are making an offer as someone with the advantage of watching the scene from the

booth. Firing that gun will bring about a sudden change in the scene and hopefully bring it out of its tailspin and is a PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE OFFER for a Sound Improviser to make.

I recently had a situation where an improviser picked up a cell phone which was critical to the scene. But he got caught up in Talking Head-Land and forgot about it. The scene plateaued. So I helped him. I played a nice shrill cell phone ring. He ignored it. So I played it again and again and again until he finally answered it. The scene escaped from Talking Head-Land moved forward again.

LISTEN CAREFULLY ASK-FORS.

If the accepted ask-for from the audience is: a chicken, then they should get a chicken...eventually. Whether or not that chicken noise comes from the Sound Improviser or the Stage Improviser really shouldn't matter. If it looks like the chicken is a central character to the scene, then let the players handle it. If the chicken is more background then Sound can handle it. If there are a flock of chickens be ready give them that.

BOOTH HELL

This is a chance to break all the rules and just try to F-UP THE PLAYERS as much as possible! If they are in a church, give them a fog horn. On an airplane, add a cow. Go nuts! Remember to pace yourself. Add sound effects slowly at first but then speed up how often you give them a SFX they have to justify. Keep the sounds going. By the end you can absolutely bury them in noises.

SOUND AND LIGHTING

There are many times working with the Lighting Improviser can make you BOTH LOOK BETTER and, more importantly, make the scene better. It is always best if the Sound and Lights are physically located next to each other. You can whisper, 'Lightning?' and put thunderclaps SFX together with the lightning flashes.

|EXPECTED OR CALLED/PIMPED SFX

Sometimes a player will 'pimp' the Sound Improviser into playing a piece of music or an FX. As an improviser you are FAIR GAME FOR PIMPING. If you pull something off, you look brilliant, if not....ugh! Your best defense is to LISTEN to everything that is being said. If the players set up toilet, then find that sound effect as fast as you can. Certain sounds come up all the time. Have a COMMON FX folder with: toilet, gunshot, dentist drill (oh, how I am weary of playing that profession on stage), dog bark/growl etc. Keep that folder open somewhere on the computer desktop so you can grab sounds easily.

QUALITY OF SOUND EFFECTS

Gunshots in real life do not sound like movie/tv/stage gunshots. That is why real life shots are often mistaken for engine backfires or fireworks. There are some sound effects which are classics and even have their own fan web pages. (“Wilhelm Scream” has been used in more than 389 films by directors including George Lucas, Quentin Tarantino, Tim Burton, and Peter Jackson) Yes, authentic SFX are good, but this isn't a documentary, this is a performance. Give the audience something they can quickly understand.

WTF SFX

Sometimes a scene calls for some sound you never in your wildest dreams (or nightmares) expected to need. “Oh, look here comes the Loch Ness Monster!” WTF???! The audience doesn't KNOW what Nessie sounds like. Maybe it sounds like a goat or a whale. Maybe both.

LAYERING SFX

Putting multiple sound effects together adds depth to scenes. The program I use (Virtual DJ Studio 7 more about that later) has 13 channels available to me, plus a separate window reserved for HOUSE IN or upbeat BETWEEN SCENES music.

WAVES + SEAGULL CRY + CALLIOPE + HAPPY CROWD=BRIGHTON BEACH. Change of weather needed in a scene? WIND + WIND + WIND HOWL + RAIN + WIND + LIGHTNING = HURRICANE

Have fun with it! Sound Improvising gives you a chance to 'PAINT' A SCENE WITH SOUND!

How do you learn this?

Honestly, like anything else in improv, you have to fail your way to success. Keith Johnstone, the creator of Theatresports™, has been known to go up to the tech booth at Calgary's 'Loose Moose Theatre' at intermission and challenge the Sound Improviser to push her/himself to fail more. (Personally, I hate failing, but I also hate a night where I find myself playing it safe. Boring!)

As stated in Part 1, sound improvising is the opposite of stage improvising. You must be constantly BLOCKING yourself. Always be asking yourself what the scene needs. If you aren't really sure, don't press 'play'. In a typical show, I will actually play only about a fifth of the sound effects that I have at the ready. Scenes can move quickly. Don't cling to an effect just because you really want to play it. There is NO ROOM FOR EGO when Sound Improvising. Be willing to instantly give up your idea and precious sound and continue to try to figure out where the scene is going and what it might need. But at the same time you can't play it safe. You are improvising.

If the audience wanted safe they wouldn't have spent their money to watch Improv, they'd be watching a bad amateur production of “Cats”!

Part 4-TECHNICAL STUFF

Thirty years ago, when I first started learning to be a Sound Improviser with Theatresports™ Toronto, we did sound using cassette tapes. We had four or five brown cassette storage cases. Each case held 24 cassettes. The cassettes had no blank leader so they were cued ready to run. It worked...but now we can use DIGITAL STORAGE and it is possible to have thousands of effects and hundreds of thousands of pieces of music. That's a lot. Sometimes too much to be honest.

There is also some great, low to no-cost computer software out there.

I can NEVER HAVE ENOUGH CHANNELS available, so my go-to is:

VIRTUAL DJ STUDIO 7---currently on sale for until March 31, 2019 for \$49.95 (U.S.)

OPERATING SYSTEMS: Windows, Mac and Linux versions available

SITE: <https://www.vdj.net/>

TOTE bought a laptop with an extra wide screen allowing me to have 13 separate sounds ready to go, plus a juke-box channel where I stuff all my HOUSE IN/OUT and BETWEEN SCENES music selections. (More about the less glamorous parts of Sound in Part 5)

Yes, Virtual Studio 7 can look intimidating at first glance, but all you really need to learn is how one channel works and that applies to all the others too. The Juke Box channel on the far right can be randomized so audiences hear a different selection and order of songs every time.

Putting a new sound into my 13 channel interface is easy as DRAG AND DROP. All set ready to go! You can customize it so sounds play as soon as they drop, but I prefer not to use that feature.

Virtual DJ Studio 7 also has a few of other features I really like. With a quick click you can have a pre-made LAYOUT of 13 (or however many channels you have) ready to go. For example, I have a Layout called GENRES with the most popular pieces of music. I can instantly change the background music from WESTERN to SCIENCE-FICTION to FILM NOIR. Audiences LOVE that! I also keep my full file of Genre music ready just beneath the program window to drag and drop into the channel selector.

The program also allows you to add an EXTERNAL SOUND CARD. Laptop internal sound cards are frequently of marginal quality. For TOTE the external card output goes to our physical mixer (a good piece of equipment to invest in) and then on to the sound system. This reserves the internal sound card for use as a cue channel.

I am also fond of sometimes using a slider which allows me to ALTER THE TEMPO AND PITCH of a channel. Frankly, I try to use it in TOTE's weekly shows NOT more than once at month. It is handy when a couple are about to kiss with ROMANTIC MUSIC swelling, then someone on stage interrupts and I make the music grind down. (A horrible record scratch sound is handy after that, though it is increasingly an anachronism.)

There is a REPEAT function allowing easy looping of sounds. But be sure you have carefully edited your selection so it can do so seamlessly.

The TRIGGER function will fire off the next channel in sequence when the sound fades or ends. You can adjust for both volume and duration.

It is also possible to MUTE, PREVIEW or EQUALIZE any channel.

FLASK/REACTION—FREE Developed in Calgary BY IMPROVISERS FOR IMPROVISERS
OPERATING SYSTEMS: Windows and OSX
SITE: <https://brandoncathcart.com/flask?fbclid=IwAR1-la2qEHDPwvB9nPK9ey--MOtUIUg1iRWtZw8K9XhyACZ0KyJnEv7JHw>

My friend Willem Klumpenhauer turned me on to this one. He is an improviser from Calgary's Loose Moose, now with Detour Theatre and TOTE, and is helping Brandon, the creator, with the program.

This system uses a mapped keyboard. You can add up to 8 different keyboard layouts much like Virtual DJ does with its Layout selector. Sounds can be colour-coded which can be really helpful during shows.

There is a great overview video so I'll leave it to Brandon to explain it all.
DEMO VIDEO- <https://youtu.be/NiGRmcRhiKg>

SOUND BYTE—created for radio stations but great for Improv Sound--\$39 for the Lite version-(U.S.) \$149 (U.S.) for the Pro version. It looks like a version of Sound Byte Lite is also available for FREE.
OPERATING SYSTEMS: Windows, Mac, Universal
SITE: https://www.blackcatsystems.com/software/soundbyte_rack_cart_machine_radio_automation_software.html

[Rebecca Northan](#) turned me on to this one. I'm a former morning show producer for a Toronto radio station, so I can appreciate all that this one can do. Each screen (rack) has up to 75 sounds ready to go. Sound Byte Pro- has fifty racks or room for 3750 sounds.

EDITING SOUNDS

Not all sound effects or pieces of music are Improv Sound ready. Pressing PLAY and then waiting while a second or two of silence precedes your effect is really annoying. In that time, the scene can have moved on and you have lost an opportunity.

It is a good idea to carefully check all your sounds (how they start and how they end)...eventually. Begin by just checking the ones you use the most and, of course, any that screw up in shows. There are a few programs out there. Google it. Or just use AUDACITY which is awesome and FREE!
SITE: <https://www.audacityteam.org/>

ORGANIZING SOUNDS

There is no one system of organizing sounds which works for everyone. Human nature! Get some input

from other Sound Improvisers in your group, but eventually one person has to set it all up.

I am sure your system would be far better than my system, but if you change things, everyone has to learn YOUR NEW SYSTEM and it might not be as good as you think. And some other bright butt will just come along and rearrange the whole thing to suit themselves. So once your group have it set up, just leave it alone at least for a few months. (Some systems are great. Others not so much. My ex-wife once rearranged my entire SF book collection...by the COLOUR of the spine! But she was a graphic artist and that worked perfectly for her!)

Being able to play a sound is really just the start. You have to KNOW WHAT SOUNDS YOU HAVE. The only way to go this is to play/practice with your computer a lot. And sometimes you just have to "PLAY AND PRAY"! You are making a blind offer. It might be brilliant. It might suck. But that's Improv for you!

Part 5-OTHER STUFF AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Aside from providing music during the show, the Sound Improviser is also responsible for some less creative but very important tasks:

HOUSE IN-(Music before the show which begins as the house opens.)

Upbeat and familiar music is a good way to start a night. House In music can set up the audience by building energy and audience anticipation. I keep a channel in my software open with a several dozen upbeat tunes. I randomize the playlist so audiences don't hear the same songs in the same order every week.

HOUSE OUT-(the opposite of...well, you know)

Having upbeat music ready for the end of the show is critical! Audiences remember the last thing they saw and/or heard at a show. If the closing minutes of the show fizzle out, even after having a great all the rest of the night, then there is a good chance the audience member will leave feeling 'meh' about the whole show. If we can't leave them laughing, at least we can leave them with a smile on their face from an upbeat tune. Sometimes you can extend upbeat instrumental music from the last scene of the night under the host's good-byes. It keeps the audience connected to what happened on stage even as they are grabbing their coats and heading out.

BETWEEN SCENES MUSIC

After scenes, music can keep the good feelings going if the scene went really well. Paradoxically, if the scene stunk up the stage, then putting some uptempo music in after the lights go down will help

rekindle the audience's mood. It can also provide a much needed shot of energy for those on stage. ("The Imps" in Oxford, England do this to great effect.)

TEAM THEMES

My current improv group, Waterloo, Canada's Theatre On The Edge (TOTE) has a licence for Keith Johnstone's Theatresports™. I try to find an upbeat piece of music to match the name of each team. It gives them a little more identity as a team and can pump them up for their first few scenes. If you can't customize something, play something rocking.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND TIPS FROM A GUY WHO HAS MADE 30+ YEARS OF MISTAKES...

THE COMPUTER ISN'T WORKING I THINK I BROKE IT!

Possibly, but probably not. (Fans of "The IT Crowd" will know what I am about to suggest.) Yup. Turn it off and on again and see if that fixes it. Make sure you have the output turned off, no one really needs to hear that annoying Microsoft reboot chime. Software glitches. CPUs do the unexpected. If the players are set to do a BOOTH HELL or something, just call out that the computer has crashed. The audience is very forgiving.

LEVELS

This note is the bane of Sound Improvisers existence and the people who are least suited to judge it are the players on stage. If the Note-taker in the audience thinks the sound was too loud, that's a different thing entirely. Check pre-show levels more carefully next time.

Teach your group the just-off-stage signal for 'too loud/soft': they look at Sound Improviser, touch their own ear with pointer finger, then give a thumb down or thumb up gesture. Sadly, there are some control-freak players who get off on giving you the signal all the time. I just nod and pretend to fix it. Naturally, they smile triumphantly back as if they have given you the biggest gift ever. I smile right back. Never bother to tell them.

There is no easy fix to levels I'm afraid. Compressor/limiters can help. But it is very subjective and what might seem too loud to the players on stage may be just the right level for the audience. Better to make a sound offer which is a bit too loud, rather than inaudible to the audience.

LAYERING SOUNDS

As you get more confident with being a Sound Improviser you can start using a bigger 'pallet'. You can underscore with music AND play effects at the same time. You can change the mood of the scene by changing the underscore. If you are changing musical underscoring, begin the new selection, then

quickly and smoothly fade the first one out. (The mix MAY sound like hell, but it probably won't.) Slight overlap is better than an awkward break of silence.

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO GAG

Remember you are swinging Thor's Hammer! Your gag can easily overpower a scene, break the reality, or just detract from the performance. I limit myself to a single gag a show. I constantly ask myself "Is this REALLY WHAT THE SCENE NEEDS?" If I find myself hesitating, I don't press play. Most nights, I don't do any gags at all. Using Sound as a weapon to get back at someone on stage who annoys you is unprofessional and narcissistic. Be better.

SOUND CALL-BACKS

Reincorporation is a valid part of improvising. And it works for Sound Improvising too. If something worked well in a scene and tickled the audience's funny bone, keep that effect close at hand to possibly use again later in the show. But remember "big hammer"!

PLAYERS ARE IGNORING SOUND EFFECTS

Learning to HEAR SOUND EFFECTS is just another stage skill improvisers need to learn. It is new and different. They can see when another player wants to talk, but your offers are coming to them, almost literally, out of thin air! Cut them some slack. You will get resistance from some players if you are introducing Sound to a group for the first time. It just takes practice, but the rewards far outstrip the negatives.

Players who habitually ignore Sound Offers only make themselves look bad. That's a block! After all, the audience has heard your offer and they expect the player to have heard and accepted it too. Sometimes a Stage Improviser will honestly miss something. That happens. It is no different from them not hearing a fellow player. It should not be treated any differently in notes.

TEACHING SOUND IMPROVISING

Get at least three people trained up on sound or you may never get onto the stage yourself again. I find that the best training is one-on-one with the student over my shoulder watching what I am doing. I quietly whisper my reasoning for my decisions. You can also train students during other, intermediate and up, workshops. This has the added advantage of teaching new Stage improvisers at the same time. Beware of taking focus from the workshop teacher. Soft whispers.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SCREW UP

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Remember the story of first time actor Jack Lemmon ever did a film with the great director George

Cukor. After every take |Cukor would say to Lemmon “Less, less, less”. Take after take take and always “Less”. Frustrated Jack finally snapped “Don't you want me to act at all?” To which Cukor replied happily “Now dear boy, you're beginning to understand!”

If you feel you are screwing up the natural reaction is to try harder. Don't! DO LESS, be less aggressive with your choices. Rein in. Pull back. Concentrate on getting the simple things like Between Scenes Music right. No one but you know these choices you had to abandon. Get your confidence back and slowly start taking risks again.

3. Maintain perspective. This is improv not brain surgery. No one will die if the wrong sound plays or something else goes awry. As with anything else in improv, mistakes sometimes make the most amazing offers. (For example. The scene is a tense Mafia stand-off. You mean to press the gunshot file, but instead you hit a cat meow SFX. What an amazing opportunity for the scene to suddenly take a whole new direction!)

NO, SERIOUSLY, I TOTALLY SCREWED UP!

Welcome to the wonderful world of Sound my Padawan. During notes you will probably get feedback as to what the note-taker did not like. The players involved may chime in and pile on their displeasure too. Shake it off. The players are probably upset because they know the reason the scene sucked had more to do with the choices they made rather than the ones you made.

DON'T EVER let a player, or anyone else, get away with telling you that “Sound is just a TECHNICAL position, you aren't a REAL improviser!”

NEVER EVER, EVER, EVER ACCEPT THIS!

I learned my lesson the hard way and I really regret taking that crap! It still smarts twenty-five years later.

NEVER!!!

Bio: (Because someone asked, not because of my huge ego....although...)

Craig Rintoul is still learning improv. He took his first lesson in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada after seeing an improv show on a local cable community access channel. 27 years later they let him on stage. Fortunately for him, he'd continued learning and performing with Theatresports Toronto. He has played everything from posh country clubs (oh, how I hate playing for stuck-up rich people) to The Rivoli in Toronto (sharing the bill with “The Kids in the Hall” Please excuse the name-dropping), a garage in the winter, in the middle of Nowhere South-western Ontario (snowmobile oil on concrete is slippery). He has plied his craft in Hamilton, Niagara, Oakville and finally back in Waterloo. When he isn't improvising, he is a TV writer, a book interviewer and a radio announcer/reporter/anchor/producer. Craig is still learning!
