

tonic.

how to use these cards:

Improvisation is the most direct link between the music in your head and the music in your instrument. The purpose of Tonic is to strengthen that link. It does this by encouraging you to think unconventionally and playful about improvisation and about music, so that you can shed the anxiety and the stress that commonly keep people from learning to improvise. My hope is that this allows you to relax more and trust your gut, and will help you make better music.

Tonic is a "game" only in the loosest sense of the word. There is no score, and there is no object. The point is to have fun, relax, and make music. Your success should be measured by how free and fearless you feel when working through these exercises. Print these cards on the heaviest weight paper you can find, and cut along the lines. Then just shuffle and go!

rules:

- (1) Listen.
- (2) Keep an open mind. Accept everything you hear without judgment.
- (3) Relax.
- (3) There are no wrong notes. If you want to play within standard Western harmony you can, but you never have to.
- (4) Don't try to play a particular idiom or genre: "jazz" or "Baroque" or "blues" or anything.
- (5) Unless the card says otherwise, use whatever notes, scales, chords, and percussive sounds you like.
- (6) When in doubt, be bold.
- (7) Most cards have no set end time. Play as long as you can until you get bored, and then move on.
- (8) The game is designed for all instruments, however there are a few cards that are specific to certain instruments.
- (9) Every exercise can be played either solo or with a group, unless marked otherwise.
- (10) Keep it simple. Let the notes breathe. If you don't understand the instructions, use your imagination to fill in the gaps.

contact:

Please get in touch if you found this useful! I'm always looking for feedback and ways to improve. Contact me at scotthughes.us@gmail.com, I'd love to hear how you're using this game.

glossary of musical terms used in this game:

Pitch – refers to one specific frequency. In other words, one key on a piano.

Note – refers to all the pitches with a given name. For example, if your note is “B”, you can play all “B”s that your instrument can play, in any octave.

Interval – the distance between two pitches. Some players may prefer to be very strict in a technical sense, but most players will be served best by treating the interval as the size of the “leap” between two notes.

Phrase – any short passage that forms a complete thought. Can be any number of notes, but usually less than 10. Think of it as a musical sentence.

Shape – (as in “improvise using the shape of a melody”). A non-technical term that refers to the structure of phrase. Does it start high and end low? Does it go down quickly and then back up again?

Groove / ostinato – any repeating rhythm using any number of notes, used as an accompaniment for another musician or melody. Think of it like the drumbeat or backing band in a pop/rock song.

Intensity – open ended. Could be expressed through volume, note density, dissonance, abrasiveness, or tempo.

Chord – any set of three or more notes played simultaneously

Scale – any set of three or more notes played in any order or combination (repetition is allowed)

Octave – refers to a note played at different locations on the instrument. i.e. “High C” and “Low C” are the same note, but in different octaves.

other questions:

Q: How do I improvise a piece with just one note?

A: Try varying the tone and dynamics. Maybe pretend you're playing a percussive instrument. Or maybe you're creating a conversation between *two* percussive instruments. If you have a string or wind instrument, try bending the note.

Q: What if I don't understand something?

A: Skip it and move on. Or take a guess and do whatever feels right. Don't forget, it's just a game! There is no pressure to play Tonic the “right way”. But if you DO want to learn more about a specific concept, Wikipedia and reddit.com/r/musictheory are two amazingly helpful places to learn.

use

two notes. When you get bored, keep one and pick a new one. Repeat for as long as you can.

play

a melody that you know well. Now repeat it over and over, but alter it by changing some (or all) of the pitches. Do not change the rhythms.

turn on

the TV or radio. Improvise, while you listen to whatever is on, but don't think about the sounds you're making. Just keep making sounds.

pick

two notes and make up a simple rhythmic pattern. One person plays this while the other improvises over it. If there are more than two people, rotate.

watch

TV or Netflix on mute. Make up a new soundtrack.

describe

what you did last weekend, using whatever notes or sounds you like.

use

three notes until you get bored. Then pick three new ones. Repeat for as long as you can.

invent

a short melody. Improvise using the shape of the melody. Go for as long as you can.

use

just one interval. You are free to move it around using as many pitches as you like.

play

(>2 players)

"telephone." One person improvises a phrase and the next person imitates it. It's OK if the notes aren't right, just try to copy the shape. Pass it on.

start

(>2 players)

playing without discussing key, form, genre, or anything else. Try to "find" each other, establish a consistent rhythm together, and end at the same time.

create

a rhythmic pulse or groove. You can use a metronome, a percussionist, your foot, or another musician. Improvise using whatever pitches you like.

pick

four notes. (If you have dice, roll them 4x.) Improvise using only these notes, but you can play them in any octave on your instrument.

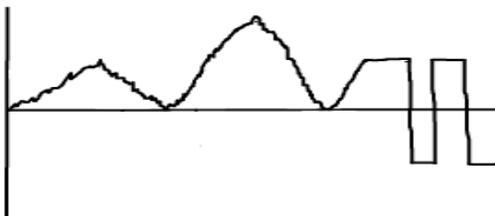
use

only one pitch for as long as you can. Then pick a new one and repeat.

think

of chocolate ice cream melting in July. Translate this thought into sound.

play this graph



The vertical axis is intensity. The horizontal is time. It should take about 3 minutes to play.

improvise

a piece with an AABA form. Each section can be as long or as short as you like. Use 5 notes in any octave. Play the form 3 times through.

repeat

(>2 players)

a single note in an repeating rhythm to create a "groove" or "ostinato." The other person should improvise using any pitches. Then switch.

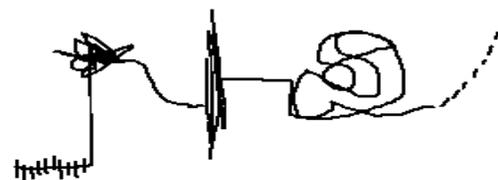
visualize

the color of the eyes of someone you love. "Play" this visual.

play

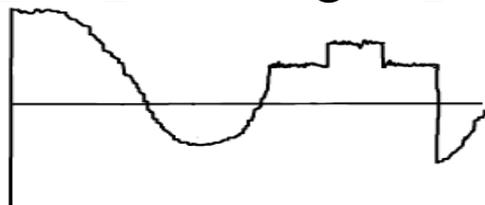
your instrument unconventionally. Experiment with non-musical sounds. Try playing the strings of the piano, half-valving, using guitar feedback, etc.

play this doodle



(2+ players). Interpret this however you like, but read it as distinct 4 sections or "movements." Make sure the group stays together throughout.

play this graph



The vertical axis is intensity. The horizontal is time. It should take about 3 minutes to play.

meditate

on a slow series of notes played in random sequence. Let them float in the air, and practice listening deeply to each one. Take 3 minutes.

use

three notes for as long as you can, in any octave. When you get bored, keep one and pick two new ones. Repeat.

use

three notes for as long as you can, in any octave. When you get bored, keep two and pick one new one. Repeat.

think

of a short sentence. "Say" it with your instrument. Try to imitate the sounds of the words, rather than the emotion. Keep trying new ways to "say" it.

play this doodle



(2+ players). Interpret this however you like, but read it as distinct 4 sections or "movements." Make sure the group stays together throughout.

limit

yourself to three notes. You can play them in any octave. Do this for as long as you can.

“read”

a piece of text from a book or magazine using your instrument. Try to express the rhythm and sound of the words. Trade sentences if you're in a group.

play

 (>2 players)

long tones together. Don't try to sound “right.” Just enjoy the sounds as they clash and fill the room.

dance

or gesture using a part of your body. Now translate the motion through your instrument. (group?)

short

notes only. Keep everything choppy, using as many pitches as you like. Do this for as long as you can.

try

 (>2 players)

to play a series of short notes at exactly the same time as your partner, without looking at each other. Accept that it will sound messy.

“read”

a piece of text from a book or magazine using your instrument. Use only three notes, in any octave. Trade sentences if you're in a group.

play this graph



The vertical axis is pitch. The horizontal is time. It should take about 2 minutes to play.

clap

or tap out any repeating rhythm. Now play it with your instrument using as many pitches as you like.

use

five notes in only one octave.
If you have dice, roll them 4x to
pick your notes.

use

four notes in any octave. (If you
have dice, roll them 4x.) When
you get bored, keep two and
pick two new ones. Repeat.

use

four notes in only one octave.
If you have dice, roll them 4x to
pick your notes.

one (>2 players)

person plays a repeating pattern
or groove. The other person
improvises over it. Then switch.
Don't communicate verbally. Just
listen for your turn.

pick

two groups of 4 notes. These are
your "chords." Improvise with the
first group for 8 measures. Then
switch. Repeat for as long as you
can.

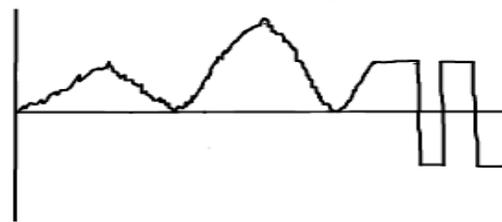
tell (>2 players)

a story about anything. Your
partner should improvise a
soundtrack to go along.

call (>2 players)

and response: One is the "caller"
and one is the "responder." Play
this until you're bored, and then
switch.

play this graph



The vertical axis is pitch. The horizontal is time. It
should take about 3 minutes to play.

simon.

Play musical "simon." Play two
random notes. Repeat over and
over, adding a new note to the
end of the sequence each time.
See how long you can go.

“read”

a piece of text from a book or magazine using your instrument. Use as many pitches as you like. Trade sentences if you're in a group.

use

just two intervals. You are free to move it around and use as many pitches as you like.

trade (>2 players)

turns. You can only play one note, chord, or sound per turn. Improvise a piece this way.

create (solo)

a conversation between two “characters.” One should be high and one should be low. If you're playing a piano, use your right & left hands.

choose

three notes. Play them in any octave until you get bored. Then keep one and pick two new ones. Repeat..

pick

two notes. You can use any octave.

build

a scale or pick one you already know. Improvise a piece using only this scale. If you have a partner, your partner should use a different scale.

select

a duration. Use as many notes (or rests) as you like, but use only this one duration.

use

three notes in any octave.

use

three notes in any octave.

fill

 (2+ players)

the room with a chord or scale. (Sus and Minor chords work best.) Drone like this and lose yourself in the sound. Meditate on it for about 2 minutes.

think

 (2+ players)

of an animal and improvise a piece inspired by it. Ask your partner to guess what it is.

play this graph

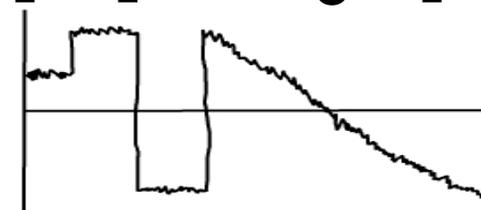


The vertical axis is pitch. The horizontal is time. It should take about 2 minutes to play.

play

a slow series of chords (notes if you don't have a chord instrument). Do not try to make "real" chords. Just play random groups of notes. Listen.

play this graph



The vertical axis is intensity. The horizontal is time. It should take about 3 minutes to play.

use

one note. Play in any octave.

play

only notes in the harmonic series, picking whichever note you want as the starting note.

play

a melody that you know well. Now repeat it over and over, but alter it by changing the rhythms and note durations. Do not change the pitches.

