

These workshops are geared at adult groups, college age and up, either orchestra programs or fiddle programs or both. Originally designed for smaller groups, they can be easily scaled to accommodate a full orchestra program.

Workshop #1: “Creativity in Music”

Tweet: Multi-instrumentalist, composer and improviser Rob Flax teaches a special workshop about unlocking creativity in music making, using composition and improvisation as tools to take charge of your own inspiration.

Brief Description: The most direct way to foster “creativity” is through “creating!” This workshop is designed to foster courage for improvisation and composition using the abstract musical structures string players already know, and encourages participants to embrace simple constraints as strategies for inspiration. When creating new music there are no answers, only better questions.

Desired Outcome for Participants: Participants will learn that they can write music and improvise! Attendees will have an experience creating new music with friends, making decisions about the sounds they make based on their own value judgements, and learn at least one technique for tonal composition and improvisation.

Suggested Age Range/Experience: All ages and experience levels. Participants should be able to play at least a one octave scale.

Workshop Outline: Starting from nothing but a major scale, participants work with Rob to build harmony from small chunks of the scale, and then follow their creative impulses together as they learn composition and improvisation strategies (e.g. develop melody and harmony using motivic development, sequencing, counterpoint, reharmonization, tension/release, and cyclical rhythmic structures, to name a few possible strategies that might come up). The process will be free-wheeling and impulse-driven, saying “yes” to any and all ideas that emerge along the way. Rob is a master improviser with extensive experience building music on the spot, and so the exact path will vary depending on what the students put in. After spending the majority of the workshop developing the ideas, the final result will be a group performance, “premiering” a new work. Following that culminating performance participants will have a short debrief where they reflect on the performance and the experience.

Setup Needs: None, though ideally a piano or keyboard for Rob to play.

[\(Click Here for a video of Rob teaching this workshop at Baltimore’s OrchKids program\)](#)

Workshop #2: “American Backbeat: A Survey of Fiddle Styles”

Tweet: Using his fiddle and a little electronic support, Rob demonstrates how the violin can be used in a wide variety of American musical styles, all of which share a common Backbeat.

Brief Description: Rob explores a variety of American styles of music, demonstrating how the violin can be woven into all of them—from Bluegrass and the music of the Appalachian Mountains, to the Blues carried north to Chicago during the Great Migration, to Jazz and Bebop with all their complexity, to Rock with its intensity and psychedelic effects, to even Hip Hop and Rap and today’s modern pop music.

Suggested Age Range/Experience: String players of all ages and experience levels.

Desired Outcome for Participants: Experience the violin outside of the confines of classical traditions and learn about the history of American music, including the unifying thread of the “back beat,” a rhythmic emphasis on beats 2 and 4 that runs throughout all American musical styles. Participants will learn to apply this backbeat principle on their instrument, exploring myriad percussive and rhythmic approaches.

Workshop Outline: About half of this workshop will be Rob performing various styles of music on the violin. Starting with questions about assumptions about the violin, Rob will demonstrate many different styles of music, all on the same instrument. Part of achieving this variety of styles will be Rob demonstrating his “One Man Band Rig,” which allows him to loop his violin to create fuller textures. This rig is not the focus of the presentation, but will allow many additional textures (and a much better rendering of rock and roll!).

Participants will dig into the “Stomp Clap,” a whole-body rhythm activity that trains rhythmic independence and emphasises the importance of the push/pull between the “strong” and “weak” beats. Participants will practice the Stomp Clap in time with various styles of music, as played by Rob and also recordings. Other participatory elements, such as singing call and response, will run throughout the workshop. Finally, participants will learn to apply this backbeat principle on their instrument, using techniques like The Chop on violin (and analogous techniques on other instruments), while stomping their foot or chording on the strong beats, while playing a traditional fiddle tune (Rob can provide sheet music in advance of the workshop for a deeper immersion into a focus on the groove).

Workshop #3A-3B: “Jazz Fiddle: Where To Begin (Parts 1 and 2)”

Tweet: Starting from a simple swing tune and/or a classic spiritual, Rob gives a crash-course on the quickest way to start taking solos over jazz chord progressions (and how to embellish simple chords with spicier versions).

Brief Description: Using a spiritual and a simple swing/jazz tune, participants will be equipped with the basic tools for playing jazz violin in the style of such greats as Stuff Smith.

Suggested Age Range/Experience: Intermediate/Advanced players that have technique but are not proficient at improvisation in the jazz styles, or would like a deeper understanding of harmony. Should be somewhat comfortable in flat keys, and ideally be able to play in all twelve keys.

Desired Outcome for Participants:

Attendees will leave the workshop with a “survival kit” of tools to make it through an improvised solo: rhythmic devices, an appreciation for the pentatonic scale as an “always useful” improvisational tool, and the understanding of *targeting chord tones* in a solo.

Workshop Outline:

Part 1 explores the classic spiritual, “Down By The Riverside,” and discusses how to make it “jazzier.” That is, a brief look at the elements that move it away from a simple melody, and how to flesh it out: emphasis on interesting rhythms, the back beat, and how to create a group arrangement that swings. Participants will dig into the pentatonic scale as a tool for improvisation, and create their own improvised “fills.” Next, a brief chord analysis, noting the

three chords used, and targeting those chord tones as an ensemble. Finally, a discussion of group rhythmic roles and responsibilities: how can we make the rhythm propulsive, without a drummer? (If this workshop is happening with percussionists, they will be put to work though!).

Part 2 focuses on applying those concepts to a more complex tune. We will use the early jazz/swing standard “Ja-Da,” a simple melody from the pre-bop era, which features a ii-V-I progression that pops up in thousands of jazz tunes (and many other places). We will discuss how to play over these chords, as well as how to use the pentatonic scale over the entire form. (Spoiler alert: all the ideas from Part 1 apply here too!). The song is slightly more complex, and we need to figure out what to do over the B section, but otherwise our approach is similar to Part 1.

Setup Needs: chalkboard/whiteboard to write on (visible to whole group), aux cord/playback to hear audio from an iPhone/iPad, piano (optional)

Workshop #4: “Improve Your Improv: Building More Compelling Solos”

Tweet: “If you can’t sing it, it’s a lie.” Learn to create solos that sound more melodically interesting, connecting your playing to the human voice for a more lyrical quality.

Brief Description: Multi-instrumentalist Rob Flax has a Masters degree in Contemporary Improvisation (“C.I.”), from the New England Conservatory, and in this workshop he shares secrets and insights from the C.I. program plus concepts developed over many years of performance. Participants will focus on deconstructing what makes a solo “compelling,” learning compositional strategies and exploring the importance of the human voice to craft better solos. Each participant will also have the opportunity to take a solo and receive feedback, masterclass style (but this is not required to participate!).

Suggested Age Range/Experience: Teens/adults of all experience levels, adjusted to the needs of the group, but with challenging exercises for the intermediate/advanced player. Some of this discussion will relate to techniques specific to stringed instruments, but all instruments are welcome.

Desired Outcome for Participants: Participants will leave the workshop with feedback on their current strengths and weaknesses, specific things to practice (technique, theory, and/or compositional), and have a new set of tools for crafting better solos.

Workshop Outline: We begin with a discussion of what a “great solo” sounds like. Some listening examples to a handpicked selection of great solos (on several instruments), and then we unpack what makes those solos so great, including lyrical, vocal lines (i.e. how to get the instrument to sound more like a voice), discussing a “horizontal vs. vertical” approach to soloing on stringed instruments. Next we’ll discuss compositional basics like building tension over the course of the solo, motivic development, and other abstract ideas to keep in mind while building a solo on the fly. Finally we will also cover the fundamental basics of soloing over chord changes (i.e. “how to hit the changes”), but the focus will be less on the “math” and more on the “soul”.

Workshop #5: “Using Pedals with Bowed Strings”

Tweet: From the orchestra to the jazz club to the rock band, Rob Flax uses pedals and effects with his violin to transform the sound of the acoustic instrument. In this workshop he demos his pedalboard using his original music to show practical applications of each kind of effect.

Brief Description: The violin family of instruments has remained virtually unchanged for hundreds of years, a feat unmatched in any other realm of technology. But with the advent of instrument amplification the modern string player has access to a whole new world of sound possibilities. In this workshop/performance, violinist/composer/improviser Rob Flax demonstrates the basic types of effects pedals, explaining each type of effect and what it does (and how these guitar pedals work with a bowed instrument).

Suggested Age Range/Experience: High school or college orchestra programs, or private string studios.

Desired Outcome for Participants: Attendees will learn the basics of effects pedals, as well as how to amplify an acoustic instrument so it sounds good (i.e. basics of EQ and compression, order to put effects, as well as different types of mics/pickups useful for looping).

Workshop Outline: Beginning with a demonstration of Rob's "One Man Band Rig" (an original song using several different effects), Rob will then walk through the basic different kinds of effects, including reverb and delay, overdrive/distortion/fuzz, boost, modulation effects like phaser and chorus, pitch shifting (can an octave pedal make a violin sound like a cello?), and a looper (used to record and overdub multiple parts in real time). The entire demonstration/performance will last about 40-45 minutes, with time for questions at the end (exact length can be tailored to be more or less detailed).

Setup Needs: Rob will provide his violin and pedalboard. The school should provide power (an extension cord and power strip, ideally), plus an amp or speaker for the pedalboard output (a keyboard amp works great, or a bass amp, or any larger guitar amp that can handle low-end frequencies, or a PA speaker/powered monitor such as the QSC K12). If possible a mic and stand would be great as well, for easier talking over loud effects (and to demonstrate what happens when you run a microphone through pedals too).

Workshop #6: "Music for Dancers/Dance for Musicians"

Tweet: Many colleges and universities have both music and dance programs, but often the two don't overlap. Here Rob shares insights on how musicians can get involved in the dance building, and how dancers can work with musicians outside their department.

Brief Description: Rob has multiple degrees in music and a master's in improvisation, but didn't start playing for dance classes until a happy accident during undergrad. In this workshop Rob will share his perspective as a classically trained musician turned jazz improviser turned dance accompanist. The workshop will be participatory and be individually tailored to the needs and experiences of attendees, who are presumably either a dancer or a musician.

Suggested Age Range/Experience: College students enrolled in either a music program or a dance program. Musicians should be proficient on at least one instrument and be interested in improvisation, though no experience is necessary. Dancers should be proficient in basic dance forms but need no musical training.

Desired Outcome for Participants: Attendees will learn some basic aspects of the "other discipline." Dancers will learn some basic music terminology and analyze what kinds of musical

ideas/gestures make them move and why, and increase their ability to communicate/collaborate with composers or accompanists. Musicians who participate will learn the basics of how to accompany a ballet or modern dance class, as well as analyze how specific compositional tools translate into movement. Most important, all participants will leave the workshop feeling inspired to seek out new interdisciplinary, cross-departmental collaborations (and maybe meet some of those collaborators in the process)!

Workshop Outline: The flow of this workshop will be highly spontaneous, embracing improvisational practices and saying 'yes' to using the existing skills and training of the group. Musicians are encouraged to bring at least one instrument, and dancers are invited to show up in dance-friendly attire. Rob will use his "One Man Band Rig" to create a wide variety of sounds, and will ask dancers to respond with movement that fits the music. Dancers will also be asked to generate short movement phrases without music, and then musicians (Rob included) will be asked to respond with music that fits the movement. Through repeated examples and explorations the group will uncover truths about music and movement that they might not have considered before.

Setup Needs: This workshop is for music and dance, so ideally would take place in a dance studio. Rob will provide his violin and pedalboard. The school should provide power (an extension cord and power strip, ideally), plus a means of amplifying his setup (which could be into the studio's speaker system via a long aux cable, or a keyboard amp and cable... exact best sound solution TBD).

Workshop #7: "Adventures in Rhythm and Language: Fiddle and Drumming Traditions"

Tweet: Around the world, many musical cultures with complex drumming patterns use language to describe their rhythms, instead of writing it down. In this workshop we'll learn to play and sing rhythms from West Africa, the Middle East, India, Brazil, and more, then apply these ideas to bowing patterns.

Brief Description: "Rhythm is a pitch slowed down." String players spend so much time on intonation, we sometimes forget to focus on rhythmic components. In this workshop Rob borrows directly from drumming traditions from around the world, focusing on learning to "speak the language of rhythm." We'll practice vocalizing complex rhythms that would be hard to read on sheet music, but are easy to recite using words, mnemonics, or syllables developed by various drumming cultures and traditions. Then we'll play those rhythms on our instruments!

Workshop Outline: Rob will show several videos demonstrating various "drum languages," such as the Mande people of Mali, classical Indian konnokol patterns, Middle Eastern rhythms such as beledi or maqsum, and then students will sing/speak those syllables. Each technique/tradition will then be applied to their instruments. The culmination of the workshop will be a new student piece, written by the participants using their own words and language, and then performed as a group with complex interlocking patterns (in the style of the Mande rhythms, but with tonality and simple harmonic elements added to adapt the tradition to pitched string instruments).

Setup Needs: Rob will need access to the internet and a speaker with aux cable to play back videos from YouTube. Otherwise no additional equipment is needed for this workshop.

(Occasionally Rob tours with a looper pedal, so if you have a small guitar or keyboard amplifier and a power outlet Rob might choose to use that as well, but this is optional).

Workshop #8: The Pentatonic Slogfest

Tweet: Learn to use the Pentatonic Scale for improvisation, unlocking melodic patterns and licks that will help you to improvise freely across all styles and genres!

Brief Description:

You may have heard of the pentatonic scale, but do you know how to use it? Master improviser Rob Flax teaches you how to practice this magical scale, from learning your instrument better to the countless ways it can be used in improvisation. Rob will have sheet music examples and downloadable PDFs in all clefs, plus show you how to take these concepts off the page and play blues, jazz licks, bluegrass runs, North African grooves, and much much more!

Desired Outcome for Participants: Attendees will learn, memorize, and internalize various ways to approach the pentatonic scale, getting their fingers familiar with the patterns and increasing their vocabulary for their own improvisations, plus explore abstract concepts that transfer to practicing other scales. Attendees will also gain a conceptual framework for exploring how to improvise more freely, choosing new shapes and melodic lines instead of playing whatever's on the page.

Workshop Outline: Rob will share a worksheet with scale patterns and exercises in one key, and work through them with the students. Starting by viewing the contents and analyzing the patterns, the students will work their way down the page, "slogging" through until some basic muscle memory starts to form for playing broken patterns using the pentatonic scale in that key. This will take the majority of a 60 minute workshop. If the workshop is longer, the final portion of the workshop will be applying the patterns toward improvisation. Rob can use a looper pedal to loop a chord progression, and students can practice soloing over the changes using the pentatonic ideas they've just learned. Or, in the event that there's no easy looper setup, Rob can strum chords on the violin in real time, to do the same thing. (The looper makes it easier for Rob to accompany himself and demonstrate, but is optional).

Setup Needs: Students should bring their instruments and be ready to play. Rob has PDFs of handouts for all clefs, and ideally the presenting organization should print copies in advance of Rob's arrival, to hand out to students for following along. If there is a projector that can display an internet browser tab, the sheet music could be projected as well, but this is not entirely necessary and the handouts work just as well. Rob will be traveling with a violin equipped with a pickup, and also a looper pedal, so if there is an amp and power available (any guitar or keyboard amp will do, or even a powered PA speaker like a QSC K10 for example), then Rob can use his looper pedal rig to enhance and supplement the experience. Again, this is optional, and completely unplugged will work fine as well.