

The Art Of Improvising

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There you are in class, happily dancing along with the teacher when suddenly she utters words that strike fear into your heart – “Now ladies, dance what you feel.” What to do? If you suffer from improvisation-phobia (as many of us do) your likely reaction is to freeze. Suddenly, your extensive repertoire of moves has deserted you and the music makes no sense at all.

Learning to improvise can be the hardest skill for dancers to achieve. For bellydancers this can be a particular issue – traditionally, our art form is improvised, rather than choreographed. Furthermore, it’s not always possible to stick to a choreography if you’re performing at a restaurant and the space is too small for your planned veil work or Uncle Bob decides to get up and dance with you for a full 5 minutes.

The good news is that the ability to improvise can be acquired, just like any other skill. The following techniques will help you on your path of learning. It is not intended that you would use all these techniques at once (although #1 and #2 should always be your starting point). Practice one technique at a time, and then incorporate just a few into your performance. Perhaps you will also discover additional things that work for you.

Keep practicing and one day you’ll suddenly find yourself dancing along without a care. And trust me – these techniques work. They have taken me from being that terrified girl in the corner of the room to a dancer who rarely choreographs a solo performance.

- *Jewel*

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1. Know your music

Middle Eastern music can sound quite complex to the unfamiliar ear. It is not structured in the same way as the Western music many of us are familiar with, nor does it use the same tonal scales. However, the first key to successful improvisation is to know and understand your music. Listen to as much Middle Eastern music as possible (include folkloric and old-style oriental as well as pop), so that you can develop an ear for it and more easily predict where a tune is heading.

If you're going to perform to a live Middle Eastern band, it's helpful to know that there exists a repertoire of popular bellydance 'standards' that most bands will know. Get to know these tunes and their titles – check out this reference on <http://www.dahlal.com/default.aspx?n=20.1> or see my list in the footnote¹, and pick out a few favorites to request. Whenever you get the opportunity, get up and dance to live bands at bellydance entertainment events. After a while, you'll start to become familiar with the popular tunes that are played again and again.

When you've chosen a particular song to improvise to, listen to it over and over before you perform. Start by listening without dancing – just sit back, close your eyes and let your imagination take flight. Try and get a feel for the mood of the music. Is it melancholy, uplifting, vibrant, subdued? Oriental-style pieces² usually incorporate many mood changes, so think about what each section of the dance makes you feel.

Now think about the sorts of movements that would go with those moods: fast, slow, traveling, stationary, big, refined. Visualise yourself dancing and try to feel what the music is telling you to do.

Listen again to your music and this time start visualizing specific steps that might go with certain passages. Write them down. For example, a section of music where the *quanoon* (zither) is playing might suggest shimmying or fast undulations. A more strident piece of music might suggest spinning, or traveling in a grapevine step.

Have another listen and pick out the rhythm and the melody. Western ears often hear the melody and try to dance along to that, but in Middle Eastern music the melody can be extremely complicated and therefore challenging for the less experienced dancer. The drum rhythm that underlies the melody is equally important, and provides its own queues as to what to do. More on that later (see section #4).

Finally, listen for accents (such as sharp drum beats, pauses, held notes) and pick a few out which you'd like to highlight in your dancing. You don't have to hit every drum beat with movement, but if you highlight a few here and there, your dancing will appear more attuned to your music.

Note: I'm a big fan of sitting back and *imagining* myself dancing before I get up and dance. This is because, when I dance, I am limited to the moves that I can do straight off. If I let my imagination do the dancing for me, my abilities are unlimited! I can think up a combination or move that is beyond my current limitations, *then* work out how to perform it.

¹ Songs I often hear and recommend knowing are: Zeina, Alf Layla Wa Layla, Habbibi Y'Eini, Bitwannes Beek, Sheek Shak Shook, Tahtil Shibbak, Tamra Henna, Ah Ya Zein, Laylet Hob and the pop song Nour El Ain.

² 'Oriental style' – this is my own classification. I am referring here to classically Middle-Eastern sounding pieces (often instrumental, but sometimes including vocals) which go through various mood and rhythm changes and which might be used during a professional bellydance performance. Examples include 'Betwanees Beek', 'Zeina' and 'Gana El Hawa'.

2. Know Your Middle Eastern Drum Rhythms

Middle Eastern music does not follow the same structure as Western music. Instead of using phrasing such as '4/4 timing', Middle Eastern music is underpinned by a series of drum patterns. For example, here is the 'saiidi' drum rhythm – used for cane dancing, saiidi folkloric style dancing and underlying many Middle Eastern pop songs:

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
dum	tek		dum	dum		tek	

Note: Numbers represent beats in the bar as per western musical notation. 'Dum' is a deep, strong beat made by striking the centre of the drum with a flat hand, while 'tek' is a sharp, higher pitched sound made by hitting the edge of the drum.

Middle Eastern songs may use only one rhythm throughout (common in pop or folkloric music), or use several (esp. oriental pieces). Musicians rarely stray outside the set rhythm patterns, so with enough study, you should always be able to identify the underlying rhythm pattern in any music.

Once you're familiar with each rhythm, you can build up a repertoire of movements that fit with it. As a basic rule, the heavy sound of 'dum' works well with stepping (the foot landing on the 'dum') or heavy hip work such as drops, whereas the lighter sound of the 'tek' is good for lighter movements (eg: hip lifts, rib cage pops) and sharp accents.

Certain rhythms are also traditionally used for particular styles of movement. As mentioned, cane dancing is always performed to the saiidi rhythm. The 'khaleegy' rhythm, which comes from the Gulf region, has its own special step and works well with hair tosses (these are some elements of Khaleegy-style dance). There is also a Turkish 9/8 rhythm that has an accompanying hop-like step on the final beat. You can learn more about specific styles of dance and their associated rhythms by attending specialised workshops.

Here are some good places to start your study of rhythms:

- <http://www.shira.net/arabella/me-rhythms.htm>
- <http://www.ketisharif.com/articles.html>.

I'd also recommend the following resources, which explain popular rhythms and provide recorded examples plus detailed notes of their use:

- 'Darabouka Class' CD and 'How to Play Arabic Drum' video, by Anne Harkin. <http://harkin.customer.netspace.net.au/>
- 'Jalilabs Raks Sharki 4: The Rhythm Workshop' by Piranha Records. <http://www.piranha.de/records/>

3. Create A Loose Structure

Improvising doesn't have to mean dancing completely without a plan. You can use your knowledge of the music to create a framework for the whole song, or sections of it. Some ways of doing this include:

- Decide on the mood you wish to convey or general types of steps or props you'll use for each section. For example, entrance (walk in circle with veil; spins & veil work); melody (hip work, folkloric steps to an underlying saiidi rhythm);

shimmying section; snake arms where the flute comes in; finish with traveling around the stage then final shimmy.

- Create a spatial framework within which to dance a section. For example, work your way around in a box, dancing to the front, then back, then each side. Or centre, corner, centre, other corner. Alternating between traveling moves and then dancing on the spot can work well here.
- Decide in which sections you'll work with the melody or the rhythm. Listen for moments when one element is more dominant than the other (see section #4 for further hints).
- Work your moves down your body. This works especially well in a *taxim*³ section, and where the music starts high in pitch and meanders down. Start with high arm movements and work down through head slides, snake arms, rib circles, stomach undulations, figure 8's and deep hip circles.

4. Dance To The Beat, Dance To The Melody

Middle Eastern music consists of an instrumental or vocal melody underpinned by a strong rhythm structure. At any time, you can choose to dance to the melody or the rhythm. By layering movements, it's possible to highlight both rhythm and melody at once (eg: hip shimmy while slowly snaking arms), but this can look busy and is best kept to a limited time.

Listen to a song, and see if you can hear both elements – for example, you may here a *ney* (flute) playing a melodious tune, while underneath is a slow but consistent drum rhythm. If you choose to dance to the melody, airy arm-movements or veil work might be appropriate. Listen to the rise and fall of the melody's pitch, and follow it up and down your body. Or match sound and silent pauses with movement and static poses. Dancing to the melody requires you to 'feel' the mood of the music and to match the sound quality of the instrument (see section #9).

To highlight the drum rhythm, use percussive moves such as hip lifts or drops. Remember that you don't have to hit every 'dum' or 'tek'. You can highlight the rhythm during slower, more sensuous melodies by hitting only the occasional 'dum' with a hip accent, then filling in with *taxim* (slower) moves such as undulations or circles.

Don't just stick to either rhythm or melody during your performance – swap between them. This is an especially good trick to create variation whilst dancing to repetitive music.

5. Develop Beyond Your Default Moves

Why is it that when we're dancing in our lounge room we can come up with 101 dance moves to go to any song, yet when improvising in front of an audience our repertoire of moves seems to be reduced to about 5? Every dancer I know complains of the same problem – under the glare of the spotlight our creativity deserts us and all we're left with is a handful of 'default' moves.

A good way to beat this is to expand the number of moves that are second nature to you, and that you can perform without thinking. Put on some music and dance. Note what moves you tend to rely on. Now think of one or two moves you would like to incorporate into your dance. Practice improvising again, throwing in those moves

³ A slow section of music where there is usually one predominant instrument being played in a meandering, improvised manner.

over and over. Try doing the same thing with another piece of music. Try it again the next day. The idea is to develop a 'muscle memory' of these moves, so that they become second nature (like operating a car's gear shift). Introduce more moves in this way over time.

For a performance, use your visualisation and structuring techniques to decide on a handful of moves you'd like to include in a particular improvisation. You can time them to highlight particular musical accents for added impact.

Default moves do have their place – it's a good idea to have a move or two that you can perform without thinking when you have a blank moment during a performance. You can also perform your default move facing away from your audience when you need to unglue your lips from your teeth, wipe sweat from your brow or just have a break from the glare of all those eyes!

6. Use Combinations

Develop a repertoire of short combinations that you can throw into your improvised dance. They can last for a whole passage of music (such as 16 counts, or 4 bars), or just a few counts. You can 'lift' combinations from choreographies you've learnt, or pick them up in workshops. Or develop some yourself – think of a few moves that might go well together then work out the transitions needed to get from one to the other.

For added interest, make your combinations assymmetrical. That is, instead of doing 4x move A then 4x move B, try 4x move A, 2x move B, 1X move C then face the back. Include direction changes, turns or traveling moves just to one side.

Practice your combinations until they become second nature – this is the key to throwing them in when the music strikes you as just right.

Also practice varying your combination to suit different music. One of my favorite combinations starts with a rhythmical step with a hip-push, traveling across the room to one side. When the music is slower, I change this step to a walking hip circle or traveling undulation. If I'm dancing to a drum solo, I might add a shimmy over the hip-push or do the combination double-time.

7. Explore Each Movement Fully

When we improvise, many of us feel compelled to show everything we've got, to keep changing our movements and include as much as possible. We worry that the audience will get bored if we do any one thing for too long. The problem with this approach is that (a) we exhaust our repertoire too quickly and (b) it's tiring for the audience! If you do your best tricks too quickly, or only once, the audience can't quite work out what you did. They'll need time and repetition to take in and appreciate all of your great moves.

Take your time to explore groups of movements fully. For example, in a *taxim* section, chose one part of the body or one type of movement and see how you can vary it. Try circles – large hip circles, smaller ones, pelvic circles, change direction, pause as you go round. Then circle your rib cage, head, only one hip, turn in a circle to face another direction.

You could also explore: shimmies, percussive hip movements, arms, figure 8's (horizontal, vertical, changing levels, rib cage 8's), using just the top or bottom half of the body.

8. Repetition Is Your Friend

People *like* repetition – audiences like to be able to recognize something you've done before, as it makes them feel like they're 'in the know' and a part of your performance. Think of the pleasure you feel singing along or listening to the chorus of a song as it repeats.

To make repetition more interesting, try the following:

- Face another direction
- Add some variation – a different ending to a repeated combination; layer a shimmy over the move; add some arms. A good rule is to start simply and build in complexity as you repeat.
- Don't repeat straight away. Dance one of your combinations, do something else for a while, then repeat it again (perhaps on the opposite side). Repeat the same moves when the same refrain of music plays again (such as a chorus).

9. Match Moves To Instruments

When you were lying back listening to a piece of music and visualizing, you may have noticed that the tone and quality of certain instruments suggested particular types of movements to you. It's a great idea to familiarise yourself with traditional Middle-Eastern musical instruments (and here's a great place to start: <http://www.ketisharif.com/articles.html>). Here are some suggested movements for just a few instruments:

- Violin:* A warm-bodied instrument with a large range of pitches, sounds and effects. *Taxim* moves that use the torso are great – including undulations, figure 8's and circles. Expansive movements, such as large figure 8's with outstretched arms, match well with the drawing of the bow across the violin's strings. You can also follow the pitch, speed and pauses in the music.
- Quanoon (zither):* This instrument tinkles like many droplets of water. The sound works beautifully with shimmies (especially a loose shimmy that matches the timing of the plucking of the strings). Also 'cascading' moves such as rapid undulations or mayas (outward vertical 8's) match the falling water feel of the instrument.
- Ney (flute):* An airy sounding wind instrument. Works very well with floaty, airy arm movements or perhaps veil work. Keep movement light, in the upper body.
- Mismar:* A traditional reed instrument that produces a high-pitched, whining sound. Often used in *baladi* or folkloric pieces. Goes very well with 'winding' type movements, such as rib or pelvic circles. Often used at the start of a *baladi taxim* piece.

10. Practice, Practice, Practice!

It may seem counterintuitive, but practice is the best way to become good at improvising. Put on a piece of music and practice using one of the techniques outlined in this article to guide your improvisation. Whenever there's Middle Eastern music being played and you have the opportunity to hit the dance floor, do so! Set time aside to practice at home where you can be as free and experimental as you wish without judgment. Improvising is a skill that can be learned, not matter how

scary or difficult to start with. Practice makes perfect and with hard work, one day you'll be improvising as though it was always second nature!

11. Further Reading

- For an overview of Middle Eastern music, instruments and rhythms:
<http://www.shira.net/music.htm#Articles>
- For an article on why it's important to understand the lyrics to a song before performing to it (plus links to translation web-sites):
<http://www.shira.net/languagedance.htm>
- For further articles on Middle Eastern culture, dance styles and bellydancing hints: <http://www.ketisharif.com/articles.html>