

Basic Improvisation

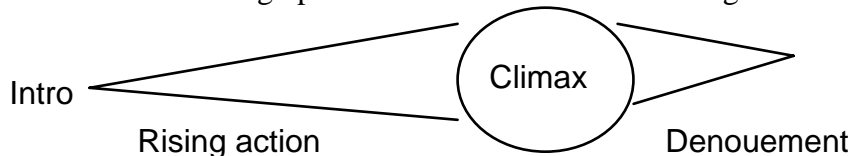
Play Along With Your Favourite Songs

As I said in the video, there's no need to jump right in to jazz improvisation the first time you try to improvise. Jazz generally has a lot of chords, which means that a note that works in one bar might not work in the next. When you begin to learn how to play jazz you should start learning to read chords (though there are a lot of jazz tunes that are easy enough to play by ear without knowing the chords).

Start by playing along with pop tunes that you normally would listen to. Pop tunes have simpler chords, so you can play the same melodies again and again and they'll still sound good. Listen to the melodies that already exist in the song and try to play them back on your horn. That can give you an idea of some notes to play that work in the song. Many beginners will say "I don't know what to play" when you tell them to go ahead and improvise to something. This is how you find out what to play. Just listen and imitate.

Once you've managed to play a few melodies that sound good with the music, you can think about using your sound to build up the climax of the song. Remember those high school English classes about short stories? Like a story a song generally has an introduction, rising action, a climax, and denouement. You should try and identify those sections as you play along. Your improvisation can help build the rising action, and you can really go wild on the climax. Usually the climax is where you can play more loudly and actively. You can use the rising action to build up to it. If you just start by playing loud, active high notes then you've got nowhere to go but down, but if you start your improvisation by playing quietly with only a few notes then you've got a lot of space to really build up to the climax.

You can think of this building up of the music like a crescendo sign:




So there you have it. Go ahead and try playing along with your favourite songs. If you can, leave your horn set up on a stand in the room you normally listen to music. That way when you go to listen to music you'll be inspired to pick up your horn and play along. Before you know it you'll be playing for hours every day and it won't feel like work or practicing, it'll feel like fun! By the way, if you can pick up a DVD of Kool and da' Gang Live from House of Blues (2001), it's fun to play along with the horn lines and improvise to the grooves. There are also a couple of great trombone solos on that DVD.

Creating Echo/Delay with a Computer

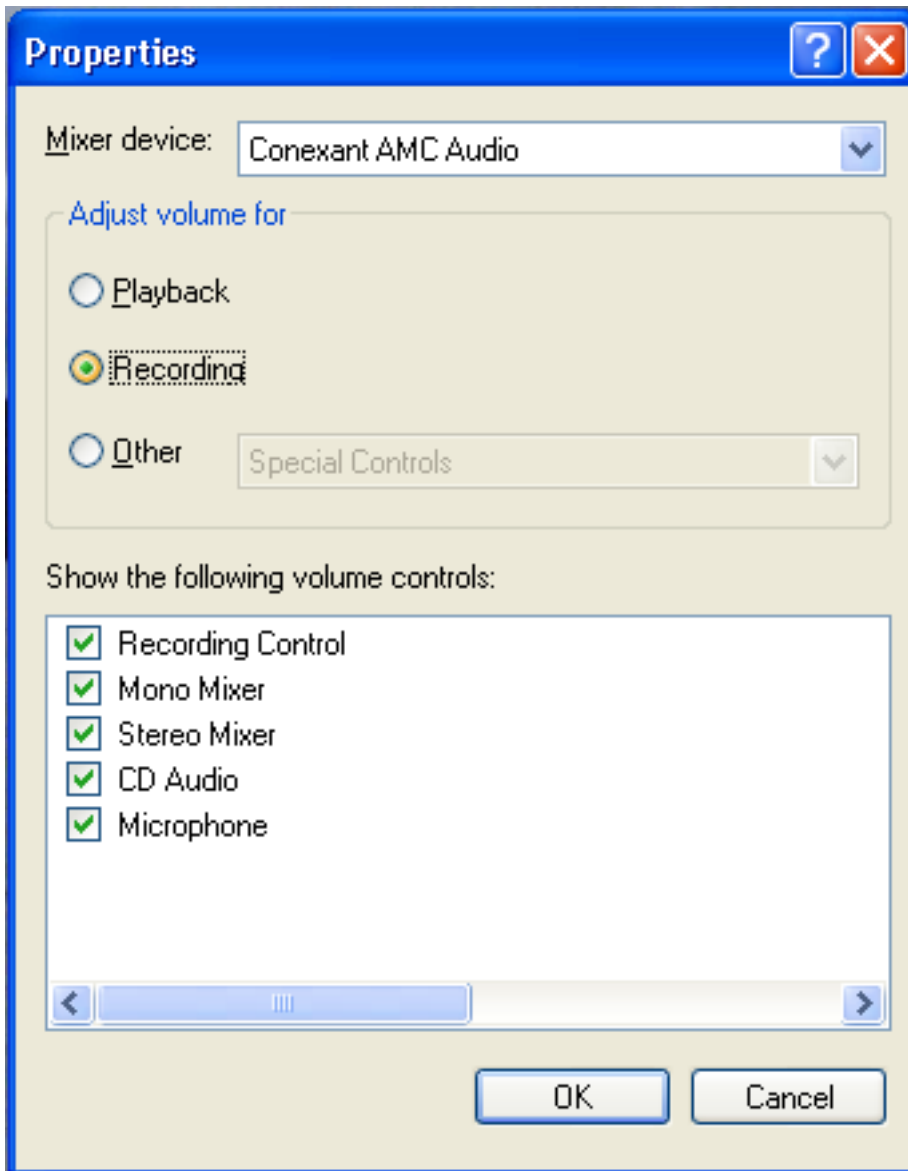
(I know it seems complicated, but if you follow it step by step you should be alright. If you can't make it work, then I can do it for you during a trombone lesson.)

I have a PC, but you can create echo with either a PC or Mac. Some new Macs come with a program called Garage Band, which I think can be used for live effects (as well as multi-track recording). The program I use to create echo is a multi-track program called Cakewalk. There are several versions of it, and the one I've been using lately is Music Creator Pro 24. The way to create echo is basically the same on most software, so I'll show you how to create it with Cakewalk and you can adapt it to your own software. Remember, there's no need to spend any money on this unless you want to use other features of these programs, like multi-track recording or midi editing. If you only want to try playing with some echo, you can probably just use the demo version. If you have an old computer running Windows 98, Pro-Tools has a free demo that can do echo (but it doesn't run on newer operating systems).

The first step once you have a program ready is to set up your microphone. The mic input on most computers is red, and close to the headphone/speaker out. If you don't have a mic you can plug a pair of earphones in to the mic input, though the sound quality will be significantly lower.

On a PC, you then need to activate your mic as the recording input. Double click the speaker that appears on the right side of the taskbar next to the clock . If the speaker isn't there, open the control panel, click sounds and audio devices, make sure "Place volume icon in the taskbar" is *not selected*, click apply, then *select* "Place volume icon in the taskbar" and click ok. There seems to be a bug in Windows XP that hides the speaker sometimes when you restart the computer, and that is the method to recover it.

Once you've double-clicked the speaker icon a volume control will appear. Click options. Make sure Advanced Controls is checked. Click options again and select Properties. If you have an external sound card, make sure the sound card you're planning to use is the one in the box at the top called mixer device. Make sure that everything is checked in the box called "Show the following volume controls". Now click "Recording" in "Adjust volume for". Again, make sure everything is checked in "Show the following volume controls". Click OK.



The computer should show the recording mixer. Make sure that Microphone is selected.

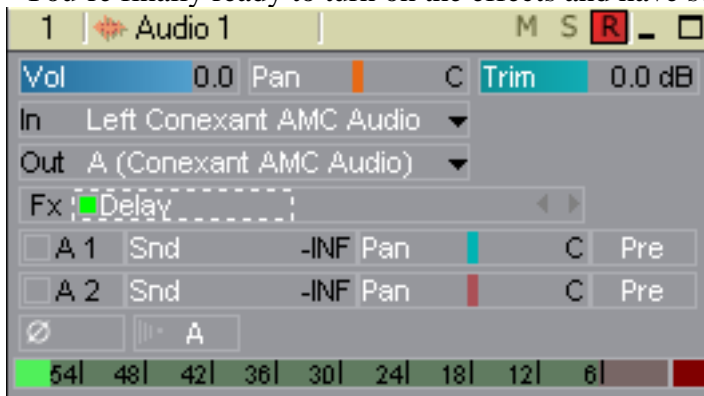
Now you're ready to test your microphone. Open your multi-track software (or whatever software you've found that has *live* effects). Select "New Project" (or the software's equivalent) and select an audio (or wave) project. On Cakewalk the selection is either "4TR Audio or 8TR Audio. It doesn't matter which you select because you're only going to use one track right now.

Now you should see some audio tracks. On most software they'll either be called "Audio 1, Audio 2..." or "Track 1, Track 2...". Select track 1 and click the R or Record button on the track. Play something in to your mic. If the software is set up correctly you'll see a volume meter showing the level of the sound you just played. If the volume meter shows your sound going in to the red area you need to turn your mic level down. Do this with the recording mixer that you accessed earlier to check that the mic

was the selected input device. If the mic level is very low, then turn up the mixer. If the mic level is very low, but you can see that there is *some* level coming though and you've already turned the mixer up as high as it can go then follow these easy steps: On the recording mixer turn the mic level back down, click advanced on the microphone tab (if advanced isn't there then make sure that advanced controls is checked off on Options, if it still isn't there then your sound card doesn't support it - sorry), select microphone boost. Be careful because this increases the volume of the mic *a lot!*

Once your mic is at a good level you need to enable input monitoring on some software. On Cakewalk you need to enable input monitoring before you'll be able to hear your effects live. To do this [within Cakewalk] select Options, Audio. Click the Input Monitoring tab. (Note: As long as you've got your microphone selected as the input device, which you did in one of the earlier steps you don't need to worry about the warning given at the bottom of this tab). Now highlight the sound card you're using from the list shown and click ok.

You're finally ready to turn on the effects and have some fun.



In the part of the screen where you selected R (or Record) and can see the level of the mic, there will be an effects category. Right-click (Cakewalk, other software may be a double click) there and select delay (or echo if delay is not on the list) from the list that appears. On Cakewalk it's under "Audio Effects-Cakewalk-Delay" on the menu.

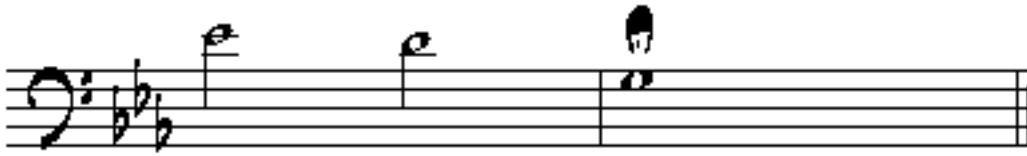
You'll have to mess with the delay settings yourself until you find one you like. Make sure the delay isn't too long or too short, and it doesn't repeat your sound infinitely. Make sure LFO rate and depth are set to 0, otherwise the repeated sounds will be out of tune.

Have fun!

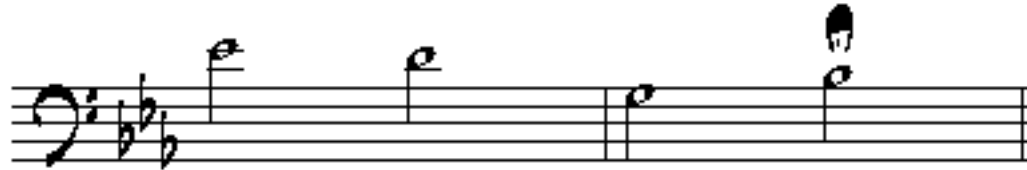
Playing with Echo/Delay

Echo/Delay is a great tool to help you use your ears. You can play a note and then play in harmony with the note as it repeats. Every note you play has to work with the last few notes you played, and if you play too many notes at a time it'll just sound like a mess. What you're doing essentially is improvising a composition on the spot, and it *is* okay to play a lot of notes when you're creating a climax in your piece, but if you just play a lot of notes all the time then it's meaningless. When you're playing with echo you can have a lot of fun playing "memorable" phrases and then listening to them back. Memorable echo phrases are usually played slowly.

Try playing this slowly and then listen to it come back in the echo:



Then play:



What you've just played is actually an EbMaj7 chord, but when you play it slowly and outline it like that it sounds more meaningful and memorable. That's just a place to start; from there you could expand on the same melodic idea by adding a few more notes to the same line, or you could do something completely different (but keep in mind that the Eb D G and Bb are repeating in the echo). It's natural on the trombone to play in the same tonal centre of C minor every time you try a solo echo improvisation, so keep that in mind and after you get used to the echo try forcing the tonal centre to move around. It's very natural to always include notes in the 1st position on the trombone in your echo improvisation, so try forcing the sound to include notes like B and E - but only after you've had your fun with whatever first comes out of your horn/mind.

Improvising with echo/delay is not about theory, it's about using your ears to discover harmonies on your own. What's great about echo is that you get to hear your own sound at a time when you're not playing. Except for when you record yourself you never get a chance to hear your own sound without hearing it as you play it. When you can play a note and hear it echoed back at you cleanly a second later it gives you a great chance to work out any tone problems you have or gives you more confidence in your sound.

That's all there is to say about echo playing for now. Have fun, and try recording one of your echo improvisations.