The ultimate goal of improvising is to hear something in your head and sing it with your instrument. A way to develop this is to “scat” solos, record them, and figure what your singing is doing. But there are some ways to develop on the road.

There are many ways to categorize improvisation styles. Here are a few:

**Melodic**

One way to improvise is to follow the melody of a tune, but alter it. This is a way that many “trad” musicians improvise over fiddle tunes. They change the rhythm, or add and subtract ornaments, or hit passing tones, or flat at third, or change the melody in subtle (or gross) ways. This is also done in swing and jazz. Stick close to the melody, inverting, changing rhythm, harmonizing, adding, and/or subtracting notes or phrases.

**Chordal**

Another way to improvise and a method also done in fiddletune music, is to follow the chords of a tune and make a solo of playing chord tones – arpeggios – of the underlying chord structure.

**Scalar**

Another way is to analyze the scales that can be used over a given chord or set of chords in a progression and use those scales. These might (usually will) change as the tune goes through its progression. For this there are major scales, and all the modes, minor scales – natural, melodic, and harmonic, diminished scales, and whole tone scales, just to name a few. In scalar improvisation we move from one note to the next, and often change scale if the tune migrates through tonal centers.

**Mixed**

Eventually, you may well want to mix these up, use a snippit of melody, take off on a scale, hit an arpeggio. Combining all these ideas.

**Last: a place to start—The PENTATONIC SCALE**

You can get through a lot of tunes using pentatonic scales. This is an easy way to start.

The most used Pentatonic scale is a subset of the major (or its relative minor) scale. Often you can use one pentatonic scale, play around with it, and successfully do a complete solo using just that scale. So, let’s examine two modes of the basic pentatonic scale.
Major (Mode I pentatonic):

The major pentatonic scale uses tones:
1 – 2 – 3 – 5 – 6 – 1
In solfege, that’s:
do – re – mi – so – la – do
In the key of G the major pentatonic is:
G – A – B – D – E – G
in the key of Eb:

Minor / Blues Pentatonic (Mode V pentatonic):

In minor or over a blues, a minor form of pentatonic that works and is often used is:
1 – b3 – 4 – 5 – b7 – 1
In solfege:
là – do – re – mi – so – la
In E minor that would be:
E – G – A – B – D – E
Aha! The same notes as in the G major pentatonic (enharmonic)! When I first learned these my buddies and I called the minor the “blues” version, and the major the “country” version of the pentatonic scale. I would play this minor pentatonic over an E blues, even if the chords are major. The minor third sounds ok, a form of dissonance we’ve come to accept.

In the key of A the minor pentatonic notes are:
A – C – D – E – G – A

The Blues Scale

It wasn’t until later that I learned there is a “blues scale.” Then again, the blues scale is based on the pentatonic scale. It goes 1 – b3 – 4 – #4 (or b5) – 5 – b7. Notewise, the G blues scale is: G – Bb – C – Db – D – F – G.

Phrasing

Use your ears to work on phrasing. Swing tends to happen in phrases of eight beats. The rhythm tends to be “swung eighth notes.” This is a triplet feel, beats being a quarter note, then the two eighth notes that make up a beat are played long-short. The first eighth note held for 2/3 of the beat, the second 1/3.

How Many Keys?

There are actually fifteen keys. Yep, count ‘em. One “nuetral” no sharps and flats, seven flat keys and seven sharp keys. Some are said to be enharmonic to each other: F# and Gb (six sharps and six flats). On guitar, this may be true. But on violin, especially in the “open” or first position, these keys are fingered in a vastly different manner. So, as you grow, be aware of these differences. The other overlapping keys are B and Cb (five sharps, seven flats) and Db and C# (five flats and seven sharps). You probably won’t run into this for a while, but keep it somewhere in the back of your mind.
**Diving Deeper:**

**Chord Progressions**

There are many “Standard” chord progressions and forms: in the blues, it’s

I — IV — I — V — IV — I — V

In Jazz one of the most common chord progressions is:

ii — V7 — I

And another extremely common progression is:

vi — ii — V7 — I

Thus we need to learn about chord numbers.

**Chord Numbers**

Numbers can be a bit confusing. It all depends one the reference. In the above chord progressions, Roman numerals are commonly used. These represent chords built on the Scale Degree. Capital and lower-case letters are commonly used (but not always!) to represent MAJOR and minor. When building a chord on a scale degree, the notes used are those in the key signature.

**Internal Chord Numbers**

When discussing a particular chord, we talk about the notes in the chord setting ‘1’ as the root. The basic triad is then 1 – 3 – 5. The seventh chord is 1 – 3 – 5 – 7. Extensions can include the entire scale:

1 – 3 – 5 – 7 – 9 – 11 – 13

Example:
The extended G chord in the C Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chord Quality**

The “quality” of a chord is primarily determined by the 3rd and 7th of the chord: the 3rd determines if the chord is major or minor, the 7th if it’s got the flattened (minor) leading tone, or the static major seventh.

The 1, or root, or “tonic” is extremely static: it names the chord!

If the 5th changes, it’s said to be “altered.” If it’s flattened, the 5th is “diminished.” If it’s sharpened, the it's “augmented.”

Example on a D chord:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Seventh</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>F#</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>C#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Seventh</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Seventh</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished (Half)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished (Full)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>Cb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augmented</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>A#</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Circle of Fifths and Fourths:

The Circle of Fourths (Fifths) is useful for both understanding key signatures (not described here), and noting how to “get home” from any chord.

The Circle of Fifths goes clockwise around the circle, the Circle of Fourths goes counter-clockwise.

In most tunes, if you jump out to some chord, to get home, you cycle through the Circle of Fourths.

If you play a chord, then its “7th” it leads to the next fourth. Thus:

A — A7 — D — D7 — G — G7 — C.

The ii — V7 — I progression is a short journey through the circle of Fourths:

Ebm7 — Ab7 — Db

Take time to explore chord progressions and see how often this form works.