

**IT'S NOT JUST SCALES AND CHORDS:
EQUIPPING YOUR BEGINNING IMPROVISERS
WITH TOOLS OF EXPRESSION**

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**FEATURING STUDENTS FROM THE EVANSTON TOWNSHIP
HIGH SCHOOL JAZZ COMBOS
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**THE MIDWEST INTERNATIONAL BAND AND ORCHESTRA CLINIC
DECEMBER 16, 2009
CHICAGO, IL
2:30PM**

THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE

There are many possible variations to a successful listening experience. Much depends on the background of your students and the classroom climate. When teaching beginning improvisers, I tend to be very specific in my questions, yet allow for multiple responses. A sample listening process for beginning improvisers consists of the following steps, each of which will be demonstrated using the tools of expression.

- **Student discovery of the concept.** When listening to a specific excerpt of a recording, the teacher can ask the student(s) a question that leads to discovery of the concept. The nature of the question is very important to the discovery process. It must be specific enough to lead the students in the right direction, yet open enough to allow multiple responses. The purpose of discovery (rather than simply presenting the concept) is that it encourages active listening and curiosity.
- **Teacher demonstration of the concept.** This step, which provides clarification, is quite important in showing how the concept works.
- **Student experimentation with the concept.** For the purpose of allowing multiple interpretations of the concept, the teacher can ask several students to demonstrate. At this point, it is important to keep students focused on the task at hand. This can be accomplished by limited pitch options, limited rhythm options or even limited playing options (phrases only in specific spots). Too many possibilities will cause students to lose sight of the musical goal, which is the ability to use the newly discovered concept.
- **Improvisation within the context of a tune.** Blues and modal tunes work well for our purposes. However, these tools can (and should) be applied to any repertoire that fits the level of the students.

TOOLS OF EXPRESSION

- **Expressive tool:** Melody Embellishment/Reference
 - **Recording:** Tenor Madness¹ (2:12)
 - **Artist:** Sonny Rollins
 - **Sample questions to help students discover this tool:** “Where do these notes (D and Bb) come from?” “How does Sonny Rollins reference the melody in his first chorus?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to improvise variations on the melody of any tune. Encourage creativity, but help them stay focused on the melody.
 - **Note:** Your students (including your drummer) must know the tune well.

¹Rollins, Sonny. Tenor Madness. Prestige, 1956.

- **Expressive tool: Timbre**
 - **Recording:** Black and Tan Fantasy² (1:24)
 - **Artist:** Bubber Miley
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “How does Bubber Miley change his tone at this point in the recording?” “How does Bubber Miley’s tone sound different than that of other trumpet players?” “How does Bubber Miley make his solo so expressive?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to experiment with different timbres. Encourage each brass player to use a different mute. Encourage all instrumentalists to growl, flutter tongue, false fingerings, etc.
 - **Note:** Encourage your rhythm section to respond to the sounds they hear. Interaction between soloist and rhythm section will make these tools much more effective.

- **Expressive tool: Inflection (Bends, Vibrato, etc.)**
 - **Recording:** Watermelon Man³ (1:13)
 - **Artist:** Freddie Hubbard
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “What does Freddie Hubbard do with his long notes?” “Where does Freddie Hubbard’s pitch change?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Encourage experimentation with vibrato, bends, glissandi, or any other inflections that come to mind.
 - **Note:** Once your students have successfully experimented with this tool, be sure to explain and demonstrate that “less is more.”

- **Expressive tool: Rhythmic Development – Variation Using Two-Note Cells**
 - **Recording:** Sonnymoon for Two⁴ (0:41)
 - **Artist:** Sonny Rollins
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “How does Sonny Rollins develop his solo?” “What does Sonny Rollins do with these two notes (Bb and F) to make an interesting solo?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Provide students with a limited number of pitches that relate to the key of the piece. Encourage the students to experiment with many different rhythms, but remain with the assigned pitches.

² Ellington, Duke. Black and Tan Fantasy. Victor, 1927.

³ Hancock, Herbie. Takin’ Off. Blue Note, 1962.

⁴ Rollins, Sonny. A Night at the Village Vanguard. Blue Note, 1957.

- **Expressive tool:** Rhythmic Development - One Pitch with Varied Rhythms and Cross Rhythm
 - **Recording:** Little Sunflower⁵ (3:43)
 - **Artist:** Freddie Hubbard
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “Freddie Hubbard does interesting things with rhythm. How would you describe them?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to select one pitch and develop as many creative rhythms as possible. Have students experiment with different types of cross-rhythms (depending on their ability level). Encourage them to use this tool as a means of building tension before a new section of the form.
 - **Note:** These tools are best experienced with rhythm section interaction. Ask your rhythm section to respond to the sounds they hear from your soloist.

- **Expressive tool:** Melodic Development - Sequence
 - **Recording:** Watermelon Man⁶ (2:57)
 - **Artist:** Dexter Gordon
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “What device does Dexter Gordon use during this passage?” “Considering the original phrase, is the sequence close or far away?” “Dexter Gordon keeps repeating this rhythm. What does he do with the notes?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to create a simple rhythm or two-note cell. Encourage sequential movement up or down the scale using the rhythmic or intervallic idea.
 - **Note:** This concept can easily be transformed into an advanced exercise for more experienced improvisers. They need only to change the pitches to fit chord symbol of the moment. This concept is closely related to the Continuous Scale Exercise.⁷

- **Expressive tool:** Melodic Development - Repetition
 - **Recording:** West End Blues⁸ (2:32)
 - **Artist:** Louis Armstrong
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “What does Louis Armstrong do with these four notes?” “Where does he intentionally alter the precise rhythm?”

⁵ Hubbard, Freddie. Backlash. Atlantic, 1967.

⁶ Hancock, Herbie. Takin’ Off. Blue Note, 1962.

⁷ Levine, Mark. The Jazz Theory Book. Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co., 1995

⁸ Armstrong, Louis. The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings. Columbia, 1928.

- **Sample exercise using this tool:** Encourage students to experiment with repetition, using only minor variations, such as those demonstrated by Louis Armstrong.
- **Note:** Repeated figures are particularly useful in creating tension during specific spots in the form, such as the end of the chorus.

- **Expressive tool:** Melodic Development - Question and Answer
 - **Recording:** Watermelon Man⁹ (3:12)
 - **Artist:** Dexter Gordon
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “What is the relationship between the two phrases?” “Dexter Gordon almost repeats the same phrase. How does he change it the second time?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to play a phrase two times, but vary the end of the second phrase.
 - **Note:** It may be useful to compare this technique to a question and answer from conversation.

- **Expressive tool:** Melodic Development - Three Time Development
 - **Recording:** So What¹⁰ (4:02)
 - **Artist:** John Coltrane
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “How does Coltrane’s phrase change?” “How many versions of the same phrase does Coltrane use?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Encourage students to state a simple phrase then add to the end of it, creating two consecutive variations.
 - **Note:** This technique is especially effective for modal compositions.

- **Expressive tool:** Melodic Development - Phrase Variation
 - **Recording:** Solar¹¹ (2:37 and 3:14)
 - **Artist:** Horace Silver
 - **Sample question to help students discover this tool:** “How does Horace Silver modify his V-I phrase the second time?”
 - **Sample exercise using this tool:** Ask students to play a standard bebop phrase two times, but vary the beginning or ending of the phrase.
 - **Note:** This is a more advanced technique. It is very useful for students studying repertoire with ii-V-I progressions.

⁹ Hancock, Herbie. Takin’ Off. Blue Note, 1962.

¹⁰ Davis, Miles. Kind of Blue. Columbia, 1959.

¹¹ Miles Davis All Stars. Walkin’. Prestige, 1954.

A FEW GREAT ALBUMS FOR BEGINNING IMPROVISERS

Louis Armstrong – *The Complete Hot Fives and Hot Sevens*

Chet Baker – *Chet Baker Sings*

Miles Davis – *Kind of Blue*

Miles Davis All Stars – *Walkin'*

Kenny Garrett – *Simply Said*

Grant Green – *Green Street*

Herbie Hancock – *Takin' Off*

Johnny Hodges – *Everybody Knows Johnny Hodges*

Freddie Hubbard – *Backlash*

J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding – *The Great Kai and J.J.*

Sonny Rollins – *Tenor Madness*

Sonny Stitt and Paul Gonsalves – *Salt and Pepper*

IT'S NOT JUST SCALES AND CHORDS: EQUIPPING YOUR BEGINNING IMPROVISERS WITH TOOLS OF EXPRESSION (APPENDIX OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES)

EXAMPLE 1 - MELODY EMBELLISHMENT/REFERENCE (SONNY ROLLINS - TENOR MADNESS - 2:12)

EXAMPLE 2 - TIMBRE (BUSSER MILEY - BLACK AND TAN FANTASY - 1:24)

EXAMPLE 3 - INFLECTION (FREDDIE HUBBARD - WATERMELON MAN - 1:13)

EXAMPLE 4 - RHYTHMIC DEVELOPMENT - VARIATION USING TWO-NOTE CELLS (SONNY ROLLINS - SONNYMOON FOR TWO - 0:41)

EXAMPLES 5A AND 5B - RHYTHMIC DEVELOPMENT - ONE PITCH AND WITH VARIED RHYTHMS AND CROSS RHYTHM (FREDDIE HUBBARD - LITTLE SUNFLOWER - 3:43)

40 Eb Δ 7

48 Eb Δ 7

EXAMPLE 6 - MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - SEQUENCE (DEXTER GORDON - WATERMELON MAN - 2:57)

53 C7 Bb7 C7 Bb7 C7 Bb7

EXAMPLE 7 - MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - REPETITION (LOUIS ARMSTRONG - WEST END BLUES - 2:45)

59 Eb Eb7 Ab7 DRAG

65 Ab7 Eb

EXAMPLE 8 - MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - QUESTION AND ANSWER (DEXTER GORDON - WATERMELON MAN - 3:12)

68 F7

EXAMPLE 9 - MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - THREE TIME DEVELOPMENT (JOHN COLTRANE - SO WHAT - 4:02)

72 D-7 3 3

75 3

EXAMPLES 10A AND 10B - MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - PHRASE VARIATION (HORACE SILVER - SOLAR - 2:37 AND 3:14)

Musical notation for Examples 10A and 10B, showing melodic development and phrase variation. The notation is in treble clef, key of B-flat major (one flat), and 4/4 time. It consists of two measures, each with a double bar line at the end. The first measure starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note B-flat, a quarter note A, a quarter note G, and a quarter note F. The second measure starts with a quarter note E, a quarter note D, a quarter note C, and a quarter note B. The third measure starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note B-flat, a quarter note A, a quarter note G, and a quarter note F. The fourth measure starts with a quarter note E, a quarter note D, a quarter note C, and a quarter note B. The notation includes chord symbols: C7(b9) above the first measure, FΔ7 3 above the second measure, C7(b9) above the third measure, and FΔ7 3 above the fourth measure. The number 3 is written below the notes in the second and fourth measures, indicating a triplet.