

PRACTICE THIS!

Number Sequences

By David Marriott

Using sequences of numbers to determine our phrasing can help train our intuition to hear a more structured pacing to our improvisations. When describing the ways to create drama or motion to an improvisation, *contrast* is a word that we often use. When that comes to the number of notes in our phrasing, one might simply say, “from simple to busy,” for example. In this article, we’ll look at a few ways that using simple yet specific number sequences to determine that path “from simple to busy” can help us better achieve our goal. The true benefits of these exercises are felt when played over songs with forms, accompanied by a rhythm section or play-a-long, but these concepts can equally be applied to – and in some cases can be more effective than – less form-based improvisations.

Step 1: Play one note in your first phrase, two notes in your second phrase, three notes in your third phrase, continuing up to an eight-note phrase. If each note is an eighth note, by the end, we are filling one full measure (if we begin on the downbeat). As an additional variation, play one note, then one note, then two notes, then two notes, then three notes, then three notes ... To change the pace, do just odds, or just evens.

Step 2: Work with a small group of numbers, no more than four (2, 3, 5, and 6, or 2, 3, and 4, for example). Spend as much time playing your phrases using the smallest number in your group as the number of notes, then gradually incorporate the next larger number, moving from the first two (2 and 3), to the second two (3 and 5), to the last group (5 and 6). Rick Mandyck once described John Coltrane’s use of alternating four and three note phrases by the terms *hur-dy-gur-dy* and *oh-dee-go*. This device is just one example of using a small set of numbers to decide your phrasing – if not as a stopping point on the way to further development, then at least as a singular approach, or to give a momentary effect.

Step 3: Try more exotic sequences of numbers for your improvisation. Prime numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, etc.), Pascal’s triangle (1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 1, 3, 3, 1, 1, 4, 6, 4, 1, etc.), the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc.), or even pi (3, 1, 4, 1, 5, 9, 2, 6, 5, etc.) make for interesting structures to use in your improvisation. Or make one of your own!

We need not start at the beginning of the sequence – you can always change the flow between simple and busy, sparse and dense, and short and long by starting at other points in the sequence. And just think, you could change the word *note* in this article to *beat* and you’d have a whole other way to approach the same concept.

Practice This! is an educational project organized by David M. Marriott, Jr. for Earshot Jazz with sponsorship from The Seattle Drum School. Each new lesson by a different local jazz artist is intended for students to learn from and for non-musician readers to gain insight into the craft of improvising.

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