

# Group Improvisation

(Reprint from the Selmer Bandwagon)

George Wiskirchen

Vol 9, #3, p.17 (Jan-Feb 1994)

[Complete article from BANDWORLD Magazine]

Personally I like to start with the blues and then go into modal exercises quite soon, while continuing to go into greater depth with the blues. But there is no one best approach.

With this in mind let's turn to modal playing. I will limit my discussion here to the Dorian mode. Explain its construction to the students: that it is a scale built on the second degree of its related major scale and has the key signature of the related major scale. Compare its origin and construction with the traditional minor scale, which is built on the sixth degree of its relative major scale. Demonstrate an easy Dorian scale, e.g. concert C Dorian by having the students play it in quarter notes, repeating the top note and descending. Then move to eighth note values until they have the scale under their fingers and the sound of the mode in their ears. Do the same with the intervals of the third.

Explain that in this tonality the tonic or root note of the mode is the basic sound, and that the mode gets its color from the first three notes (C, D, Eb). Point out the absence of the leading tone in this mode. Inform them that any notes of the scale can be used in their improvisation.

One of the most important values of the modal approach is that it frees the student from a preoccupation with chord changes. Because he thinks only in a tonality or scale, he is better able to concentrate on building a good communicative melody. This makes modal exercises a good opportunity to stress the points of melody building and effective communication cited earlier. Refer again to the David Baker book. Teach the students to think in symmetrical phrases of four, eight or sixteen measures. Point out the effectiveness of silence or rests. Indicate that they should balance the movement of the solo between rapid, active sections and a slower moving answering section. Assign emotional content to the solos and remind them of the techniques for achieving various feelings. To help them express something in each solo, get them to view improvisation as extemporaneous speaking or conversation, where we put together words and word patterns in a relatively unprepared manner.

We can communicate on two distinct levels or, as is more usual, in a combination of these levels. First there is the intellectual approach, which involves a studied movement over the changes by arpeggios and scalar movements using the "classical" techniques of composition or the methods of "variations". A solo of this type is developed from a motif derived either from the melody or from the harmony. The emphasis here is on clever and interesting logical development. In contrast, the emotional approach, while not discarding logic, places primary emphasis on communicating some feeling, such as peace, anger, calm, happiness, sorrow, depression, etc. Check out the excellent chapters in David Baker's book on approaches to building an improvisation, on the balance and combination of the linear and vertical approaches.

Students must be careful not to use too many ideas; young players often feel compelled to play or "say" everything they know in one solo. While stressing economy, constantly remind them to think melodically. Any effective melody or development must build to a point of climax or tension include playing louder, faster, higher (or with ascending lines), with more rhythmically jagged lines, use of larger intervals or leaps, use of more intense tone quality, use of dynamically building repetitions. Go in the opposite directions for release.

A solo should not be a "let down" in the flow of a composition. Solos are to jazz what the development sections is to the symphonic sonata-allegro form and must carry the music forward by deepening its impact. To avoid monotony, use the entire range of the horn; vary dynamics; vary approaches to the melody; use contrast, for example, between a flurry of notes and sustained or sparse sections; between a loud and soft; between high and low, etc.

To help the students learn to listen critically to their own and other students' solos, it is profitable to tape rehearsals and performance for analysis. Listening to recorded solos by professionals will help them spot the techniques used by the performer to make his point. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with copying an artist's approach, developmental ideas, etc. Complete originality is rare in any case, and the degree of originality each will acquire will come with experience. To improvise in modal tonality, the soloists may play anything that makes melodic sense, emphasizing the root, third and seventh degree of the appropriate scale. The bass simply walks, using the scale or fragments of it emphasizing the root. Piano and guitar can comp, using primarily chords built on the first, second and third degrees of the scale (other chords derived from the tonality can be inserted, but these chords probably best give the sound of the Dorian tonality).

Play round the band using eight-bar phrases at first; then extend it to 16 bars. When the students have got the feel of the mode, teach them another mode a full step above the first. Let them gain familiarity with this new mode and then mix the two. Explain the forms frequently encountered here: the free-length modal solo that is so common today where the soloist plays until he has completed his statement and then another soloist takes over; the specific length chorus of 16 or 32 bars; the varying tonality forms, e.g. a 32 bar chorus (16 in the first mode; eight in a second mode a full step above; eight again in the first mode); alternating tonalities in ever shortening values (four bars, then two bars, then alternating measures).

Next time: Pentatonic and Figures.

Source: 9•3•17