

The “Art” of Improvisation

There are so many connections and correlations between visual art and improvisation. In fact, one of the major reasons I wrote *The Art of Improvisation* was to provide a solid visual context for improvising. My brother is an accomplished graphic designer and cartoonist; my father was an outstanding calligrapher. Although I have trouble drawing straight lines (my daughters far surpass me in art skills), I gained an appreciation for the beauty of visual art and the fascinating principles behind it. For those of you into Myers-Briggs personality assessments, I am an INTP, which David Keirsey describes as the Architect type – probably one of the reasons that understanding and explaining the arts hold so much fascination for me.

So as not to ramble on, I’ll focus on four principles of visual art that have strong counterparts in jazz improvisation: vision, color, density, and organization.

Vision

Just as an artist sees in the mind’s eye what the creation might be, the improviser sees a rough picture of what the solo might sound like. But too often we link vision with a finished product; we think we need to see how it’s all going to turn out before we even start. Overall vision is fine, but we also need *immediate* vision.

Immediate vision is what guides the artist’s hand and the improviser’s fingers. It enables you to gather context from what’s around you and see how your current efforts are relating to the whole work of art. (Yes, improvised solos are really works of art, or at least they *should* be.) In the *Art of Improvisation* I talk about immediate vision in three directions: backward, current, and forward. In other words, what have I done; what am I doing now; and what am I going to do next?

Many improvisers are trapped in the “now,” hoping to get a clue for what comes next. But when you can see behind you, the future often opens up as well – like learning from history. Three-way vision really is possible; it just takes dedicated, progressive practice and the belief that you can do it.

The SHAPE metaphor (See, Hear, and Play Expressively) provides a link to visual improvisation. It also enables a three-dimensional approach, where rhythm is on the horizontal plane (x-axis), melody is on the vertical plane (y-axis), and expression fills in the remaining space (z-axis). Creating music in three dimensions can be a tremendously satisfying experience.

Color

The eye can distinguish thousands of colors, and the ear can distinguish thousands of sounds. I like to borrow the visual frame of reference and think of sounds as colors. Discovering, mixing, and using a wide variety of colors is both challenging and exciting.

The improvisation color palette is based on elements such as these: vocal or instrumental sound quality; color tones (I like that name) and non-harmonic tones; dominant alterations; rhythmic syncopations; and a multitude of expressions (articulations, special effects, dynamics, and so forth). When you get down to the low-level and detailed view, each little expression bears its own weight and has its own significance. Together they influence the character of the overall picture.

As improvisers, we have a great responsibility to choose sounds as wisely as artists choose colors. And we have the added “treat” of doing it all within a matter of minutes or seconds!

Density

The visual artist can pack many details into a small space or instead open a broad and simple perspective. Likewise, the improviser can cram many notes into each measure, or let one note or even silence linger on. Which is best – dense or sparse? That depends on the picture you’re trying to create. Density can create intensity, and sparseness can create relaxation. Getting the proper balance of both can really help you get your point across effectively.

On a semi-related note, one of my favorite lines of movie dialog is from “Back to the Future.” George McFly finally gets up the nerve to tell his girlfriend how he feels about her and blurts out, “Lorraine, you’re my density!” In a way he was right – density can create destiny. So many artists and improvisers think more is better, so their overloaded approach to density becomes their destiny.

On the other hand, sparseness is not automatically a good thing – it can be just plain boring. Miles Davis’ sparse solos were artistic because they were also rich in expression, color, and timing. Remove those elements from the solo (as many improv imitators unwittingly do) and you’re a lot closer to boring.

See also the *Soundscapes* chapter (4A) in *The Art of Improvisation* for more details on density in improvisation.

Organization

Herein lies the genius of creation – how do we organize our elements into a meaningful planet, not just a barren asteroid? (Although I’m sure the many barren asteroids in the universe have their purpose, too.) Rather than jump into a lengthy discussion of the principles of organization at this point, I’ll point you in two directions that may help.

First, chapters in *The Art of Improvisation* have many tips and ideas about organizing ideas for improvisation. Second, *vision* – it all comes back to that. The better you see possibilities and understand their relevance, the better you can organize them into a meaningful work of art. And that makes it all worthwhile.

OK, I couldn’t resist – here are a few organization tips as well:

- If you don’t really need it, leave it out. Resist the temptation to grab whatever is easy or near-at-hand and plug it in where it doesn’t belong.
- Concentrate on timing and execution. You may have a great idea that essentially gets ruined because it’s not delivered confidently.
- Pay attention to your graph. Do you know what your soundscape is looking like and sounding like? Be ready to step it up or back down in order to help the overall picture of your solo.
- Understand the organizational framework you’re riding on – the tune form, the chords, the rhythmic feel, what the other musicians are playing, etc. These all provide important clues for organizing your musical ideas.