

Development: The Shifting Sands

There are many kinds of development tools and techniques. The Art of Improvisation discusses and explains many of the best ones. With all these tools, there still seems to be just three basic approaches to using development tools:

1. Use one tool repeatedly then move on to the next tool.
2. Combine tools; use two or more tools at the same time (see chapter 4D: More Development).
3. Shift tools more frequently, usually within a single phrase.

Method 1 is the easiest and probably most common, because it allows you to focus on one tool at a time as you improvise. However, many players end up overusing the tool they choose. It's tempting to keep repeating a development idea until it loses its effectiveness.

Method 2 is probably the most difficult to master, because you need to combine tools in a way that produces good results. Those results can be very effective, but it still takes a considerable amount of practice to master the use of multiple tools at once.

The Shift

Method 3 is surprisingly effective. It's more difficult than method 1, but not as hard as combining tools. For example, you can play wider intervals, then throw in a few trills, then augment rhythms, all in the same phrase.

Great improvisers like Wynton Marsalis and Chick Corea know how to shift development tools within a single phrase. When you shift development gears quickly enough, you combine a sense of unpredictability (shifts) with predictability (the repetitions in development).

To practice development shifts,

1. Make a list of development tools to use.
2. Start to improvise.
3. Quickly choose a tool from the list and use it in your solo.
4. After using the tool once or twice, quickly choose another tool from the list, and so on. You can go back and use a tool you've chosen before.

As you get more skilled with method 3, try mixing it with the other two methods in your phrases. When you learn to shift development tools, you open the door to some great phrases in your solos!