Left and Right

I have been intrigued for many years by the research on left- and right-brain functions and how that applies to creativity. I'm no expert on the topic, but the basic point is that the right hemisphere of the brain seems to control creative and language functions, while the left hemisphere deals with logic and mathematics.

So how does improvisation fit into this scenario? Most people would probably say that it's a right brain function – it's highly creative and deals with a musical language. Yet there is quite a lot of left-brain work in improvisation: finding scale-chord relationships, sorting through a maze of rhythmic beat placements, developing motifs by shifting notes or rhythms, copying or adapting ideas from other players into your solo, etc. All of these activities take a lot of quick calculation and logic.

My feeling is that improvisation is a wonderful blend of right- and left-brain activity. In fact, the creative process itself is a mix. Sure, it's thought of as right-brained, but creativity needs to be fed by resource information and logic. The two sides working together form an amazing partnership.

SHAPE and Details

Visualizing musical shapes is a creative process that drives improvisation. Behind the scenes, there is a lot of left-brain activity going on to actually create those shapes. The bottom line: understanding the details of how melody, rhythm, development and chords work will help you build the musical shapes you see.

Right, Left, and Flexible Scale Levels

One way to look at left-and-right cooperation in improvisation is to re-examine flexible scales. By going through the 7 Levels (see Chapter 1E) you gradually add logical complexity to musical shapes. At Level 1 (all 8th-notes) you just deal with color tone numbers and note-scale relationships. Then as you add rhythms and widen the skips, the possibilities grow. The decision making and data processing in your brain get faster and more intense.

Right, Left, and Chords

Another opportunity is melodic connection between chords (see Chapter 3B). While the visual process carves out an interesting melody, the logical side kicks into high gear when a new chord approaches. W hat will be the last note of this chord? What are the connection points into the new chord? Which one will I choose? These decisions happen in less than a second, and they keep the melody smooth and "in control" of the chord progression.

Harmony

Perhaps the most satisfying, enjoyable, and exciting aspect of improvisation is working with creativity and logic at the same time. The possibilities for left-and-right cooperation are endless. As we pursue the path of cooperation, our abilities to visualize, think, and create musically are expanded. And we don't have to use all our tools or skills at once – just a little at a time, in beautiful combinations.

