

Practice This!

David M. Marriott, Jr.

David Marriott is a Seattle-based trombonist, composer, educator, and blogger, performing locally with dozens of groups, including the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra and the Marriott Brothers Quintet. Learn more about David at <http://www.redraspus.com>.

Using Elements of Composition in Your Practicing

In the vast majority of styles within improvised music, we are generally asked to perform a rhythmic melody and then improvise on the harmony and form of this melody. Quite often, players will disregard much of the information provided by this rhythm, melody, harmony, and form when it comes time to improvise. While most improvisations seem to clearly address the issue of harmony, little reference is made to the rhythm, melody, or form, and it is these elements working together that create a cohesive musical message. Also, the many traits that we identify when talking about a “good solo”—thematic development and call-and-response, for example—allude to some compositional approach to our improvisations.

By merely paying attention to these aspects in your practice routine, you will improve the quality and cohesiveness of your improvisations and create more interest from listeners.

Addressing the form of song you are playing can help you to create more dynamic and dramatic improvisations. The form of the composition helps us to identify differing sections of the song, and we should take note of these sections. If our song has an AABA form, for example, one might play bluesy during the A sections and linearly during the B section (Lee Morgan does this on his solo from “Moanin”). If our song has an ABAC form, one might play simple ideas on the A sections, medium complex ideas on the B section, and the most complex ideas on the C section. Remember that by intentionally doing these things when you practice, you are training your intuitive ear to hear this way; the idea is not to think this way while improvising, but to spontaneously create the same drama.

Another technique is to use the melody as a cue for your improvisation. One idea is to use the melodic phras-



Photo by Daniel Sheehan

ing of the song. Looking at a tune like “Now’s the Time,” we could say that the melody consists of the following melodic phrasing: AABBAABBCDEE, with each letter representing one bar. When you improvise on the blues, try to improvise using this same melodic phrasing. Another idea is to use the rhythm of the melody. Looking at a tune like “All the Things You Are,” we could say that the melody consists of the following melodic rhythm: W-DH-Q-Q-Q-Q-Q-Q-DH (Whole, Dotted Half, Quarter). Now improvise using

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Practice This! is an educational project organized by David M. Marriott, Jr. for Earshot Jazz with sponsorship from The Seattle Drum School. Each month new lesson by a different local jazz artist will appear for students to learn from and for non-musician readers to gain insight into the craft of improvising. An expanded video version of the lesson can be linked to from www.earshot.org.

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nist is drawn to experimental settings and he creates a promising one here. He is joined by **Juan Pablo Carletti** on drums, **Doug Haning** on clarinets, **Dan Blunk** on sax, **Marc Smason** on trombone, and **Frank Clayton** on bass.

On September 20, **Analog America** uses phone machine tapes and found sounds to depict the world as they want it to be. Hollow Earth Radio founders **Amber Kai Morgan** and **Garrett Kelly** are joined by **Doug Arney** and **Olie Esleman** on guitars, toys, and effects.

On September 27, **the Chris Stover Quartet** creates beautifully-made new

music. With Stover on trombone, **Victor Noriega** on piano, **Byron Vannoy** on drums, and **Chris Symer** on bass.

Sound wiz **Doug Haire** produces *Sonarchy* and comes up with the band descriptions appearing above. The show airs on KEXP 90.30 FM from midnight to 1 am every Saturday night (in other words, the first hour of Sunday).

If you miss the show, you can always find it for two weeks on KEXP's website. This month's shows will also be available as podcasts one week after they air from www.kexp.org/podcasting.asp.

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pseudo-walking bass and brushes. The melody in Gravitas' version, however, is distributed among all four instruments; without a drummer there's one more person to give melody and accompaniment lines to. Peggy Lee's pizzicato cello accompanies Horvitz's solo, and Miles solos over the rest of the quartet. Both takes feature the same brisk-walk tempo and sudden jump up in tempo at the end, making the results quite different but equally effective.

While both albums are very good and bear the compositional signs of their leader, I personally found *One Dance Alone* more stimulating and rewarding. I enjoy it more on an intellectual rather

than emotional level in the same way I enjoy Schoenberg's serial works. It's a more innovative and forward-looking jazz record than *A Walk in the Dark*. Those who prefer more traditional, straight-ahead jazz will favor *A Walk in the Dark*, which just goes to prove that Horvitz's two albums can do different things in drastically different, yet successful, ways. These albums are a tribute to Horvitz's compositional chops, creativity, and talent, and they speak to his ability to address separate audiences.

- Chris Robinson

Sweeter than the Day performs at the Art House (420 Franklin St SE # B, Olympia) on Sunday, September 28 at 7:30 pm.

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this same rhythm but with your own notes; in other words, put a new melody to the original melody's rhythm.

Lastly, looking at the harmonic form of a tune can give us more ideas for improvisation. If the harmony for a simple form of the blues is I-IV-I-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-IV-I-I, then we might say that the harmonic form is ABAABBAACBAA. One could assign various meanings to each of these letters. A, B, and C could each be a specific melodic idea that

you have practiced. Each one could be a different register, dynamic level, or harmonic approach. The possibilities are limitless; you need only think with the idea of composition in mind.

It has been said that the best improvised music sounds composed, and that the best composed music sounds improvised. By thinking a little more like a composer and addressing all the facets of the composition we are using as a vehicle for improvisation—not just the harmony—we can train our musical ear to hear in a composed way.