

Improvisation Structure for Saxophones and Drums

By David Kanaga

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Note: both saxophonists and drummers should actively avoid falling into consistent time. If time is kept, it is only so that it can later be freed.

[0] Before beginning, the saxophonists must agree on a “base note” that they can all play. This note will provide the only tonal consistency in the piece.

[1] All saxophones begin by playing the base note. There should be no regard for rhythmic consistency; however, each player may pulse in time if they wish, though their time keeping should never last longer than a full breath. Try to pulse irregularly, or else hold long notes.

[2] The lead saxophone may begin to play at an octave above the base note at any time. When they hear this change, the other saxophones should also play up an octave. The lead saxophone may move back to the base note at any time; again, the other players follow suit. This game of follow-the-leader happens until the lead player is ready to move on.

[3] The lead saxophone trills on any two notes and the other saxophones follow suit, though not necessarily on the same notes. This happens until the lead player is ready to move on.

[4] The lead saxophone solos. The other saxophones must stop playing. Drummers should continue, but change something in their playing to call attention to the structure.

[5] When either of the non-lead saxophones are ready, they may enter the solo, to begin the collective improvisation. The rules for the improvisation are different each of the three times through the form. The three rules are: (1) everyone must play short bursts of sound, the goal as an individual being to produce more silence than sound; (2) everyone must imitate the lead player, by playing similar textures and melodic/rhythmic shapes; (3) free improvisation—listen!

[6a] (for 1st and 2nd playthrough) During a collective improvisation, when a drummer is ready to move to the top of the form, s/he must play a consistent, mechanical, evenly spaced rhythm on a single drum. The other drummers must respond similarly, though at different tempos. The saxophones respond by trilling on any two notes. When the next lead player is ready to restart the form, s/he returns to [1], now the leader.

[6b] (for the final playthrough) During the free improvisation, when any saxophonist is ready to end the piece, s/he must return to the base note of the piece, and the others must follow suit. This note can be played for as long as the players wish. The players should come to an end intuitively.