

**PROBLEM:** Some beginning improvisors have practiced diligently, achieve a good sound on their instruments while practicing, and have acquired the ability to play their eighth-note scales up to speed. Yet in a performance context they tend to play short, over-articulated ideas (half and whole notes), they are unable to play their learned scales while the rhythm section is playing a compelling beat behind them, and their sound becomes "pinched" and doesn't project.

**Analysis:** This problem occurs because such students are unaware of how quickly one must think while playing: not just the *intellectual* thinking that is involved with practicing, but the *intuitive*, "by ear" kind of thinking that performance demands. They incorrectly assume that the thought processes in practicing are directly applicable to the performance situation. Many students are not aware of their intuitive abilities and lack confidence in this area.

**Solution:** The beginning student should understand the different mentalities involved with practicing and performance: *things are not used in the same way they are learned!* Explain that the practicing mentality is an intellectual process that is too slow to use during performance, that the intuition and the ears can make musical decisions at a speed much faster than the intellect can. Often these decisions are so quick that the performer is unaware of their occurrence.

In order to create this awareness-and to give students an understanding and confidence in their ability to think intuitively-try the following experiment. Request such students play a mid-range long tone, with the metal of the horn "buzzing." Point out and support the fact that they have the ability to play with a good sound and have demonstrated this ability to you and themselves. Next, ask the student to play (by ear) at a medium tempo with no accompaniment an eighth-note "be-bop" scale appropriate to D7 (D Mixolydian ascending and descending from root to root, with the added half-step between the flat seventh and the root), then a G7 and an F7 scale in the same manner. Once they have accomplished this, point out that they have the ability to play their scales in tempo and have demonstrated this ability to you and themselves.

Then ask them to play these scales in a performance context (with either a rhythm section or a play-a-long record). The Sonny Rollins tune "Pent-up House" is an excellent format for this experiment. Have them play the scales (*as in Example 5*) at a tempo at about a quarter note = 192.

Example 5

Repeat this exercise for as many choruses as possible. Students will subjectively perceive this tempo as too fast to use their intellect and will be forced to use their ears and intuition to accomplish this task-*do not let them stop!* If they appear frustrated, encourage them that they can accomplish this challenge, that mistakes are OK and not a reason to interrupt. If they lose their place, call out the scale roots at the next change in the tune and encourage them to jump in again. Remind them to play with the good

sound they know they have.

Students should then divide the scales into consecutive, four note Mixolydian scale groups (without the "be-bop" half-steps) and play these (by ear) ascending and descending in tempo without the rhythm section. They can then play these groupings (by ear) over the rhythm accompaniment in any order at the same tempo. (Examples 6 & 7.) Again, remind them that mistakes are OK!



Finally, the students should play with the rhythm section without thinking of the exercises—just moving their fingers at will in an eighth-note manner. At this point, the student will perceive the subjective reality of the speed at which an improviser has to think *intuitively*! This accomplishment will give students confidence in their ability to play by ear. (Note that our goal here is not to promote the mindless rambling of ideas but rather to provide an unconfident and less-experienced player the realization of what is yet required as well as the confidence in his or her existing skills.)

### An Expansive Opportunity

Many more instances where behavior modification can be applied exist. I hope that these examples will lead to an additional and helpful mind-set for many teachers and students. By adopting the corrective approach and developing the ability to perceive and analyse problems in the manner described above, teachers can enjoy an more organic involvement in the rapid growth of their students.

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