

Rhythmic Phrasing in Improvisation

BY ED SAINDON

Not only does the specific selection of notes, level of harmonic sophistication, and technique of a player contribute to the overall sound of an improviser, but a large part of a player's sound and voice is determined by rhythm. Many improvisers primarily work on developing improvisational techniques based on specific note selection. Consequently, rhythm is usually last on the list of priorities and never fully gets as much attention as it should. As a result, the world of rhythm offers the improviser and composer many untapped possibilities.

More often than not, many improvisers resort to playing primarily consecutive eighth notes. In addition, there is either a lack of phrasing or the phrase lengths tend to be very repetitive and constricted by the chord progression. As a result, the lines tend to be monotonous, predictable, and hemmed in by the barlines. Assimilating the concept of rhythmic phrasing will give the improviser a sense of phrasing free from the barline. The goal should be to integrate the concept of rhythmic phrasing in one's playing so that the rhythms become instinctive and a natural part of one's vocabulary in the improvisational or composing process.

A fringe benefit of working on this rhythmic concept is that the player's time, ability to hear longer phrases, and overall sense of form should improve as a result of playing these rhythms. Working on these concepts, players should begin to "hear" more interesting rhythms that "float over the barline." The end result will be a sonic erasing of the barline and a sense of time that is characterized by rhythmic freedom.

RHYTHMIC PHRASING

The term rhythmic phrasing refers to the grouping of notes (called a *rhythmic unit*) based on a specific rhythmic pulse such as eighths, triplets, or sixteenth notes. Depending on the time signature, rhythmic pulse, and rhythmic unit, the phrasing will generally tend to cross the barline, thereby obscuring the overall sense of time.

The terms *grouped* and *phrased* are interchangeable. "Triplets phrased in four" or "triplets grouped in four" are both correct.

The rhythmic unit may be delineated by a number of techniques. As will be evident in the following examples, the rhythmic unit may be created via the use of accents, rests, partial subdivision, and pitch. In all of the examples, the initial rhythmic unit will be indicated with a bracket.

The term *cycle* is the time it takes for the rhythmic unit to play itself out from beginning to the end and to begin again on the downbeat of any succeeding measure. For example, eighths phrased in four in 3/4 take two measures for the rhythmic unit to start again on the downbeat of the third measure. This two-measure cycle will consist of three units of the eighths phrased in groups of four.

2 measure cycle



RHYTHMIC PHRASING IN IMPROVISATION

Try improvising using the examples in this article. At first, try playing the rhythms using a specific scale. The more one practices and "hears" these various rhythmic groupings, the more they will seem to naturally appear in one's improvisation. Eventually, the goal is to be able to play these rhythmic units over the progression of a composition.

The improviser is also encouraged to be able to start a rhythmic grouping on any beat or on any partial of any pulse in the measure as opposed to only beginning the cycle on beat 1. The improviser should know where he or she is in the form of the song as well as know where beat 1 is of every measure.

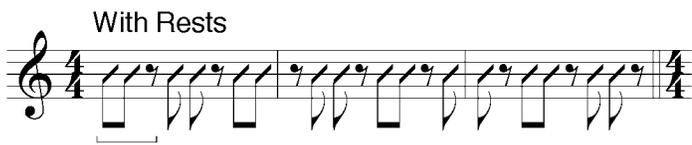
In addition, it is suggested to freely go back and forth between various rhythmic units based upon different rhythmic pulses such as eighths, triplets, and sixteenths without the cycle of each rhythmic unit necessarily having been completed.

EXAMPLES OF RHYTHMIC PHRASING

Eighths Notes Phrased in Three in 3/4 (1-Measure Cycle)

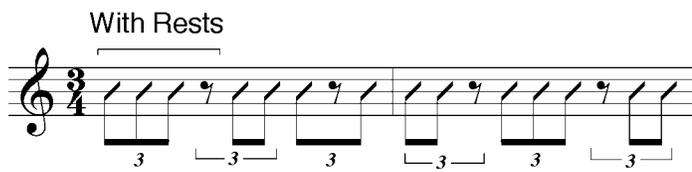


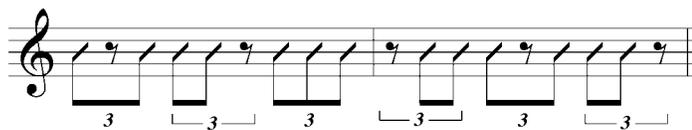
Eighth Notes Phrased in Three in 4/4 (3-Measure Cycle)

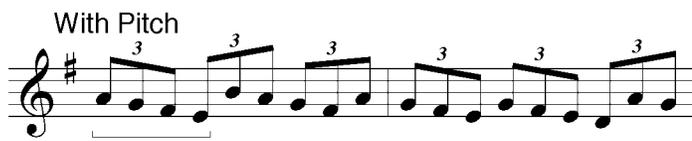
With Rests


With Pitch


Triplets Phrased in Four in 3/4 (4-Measure Cycle)

With Rests


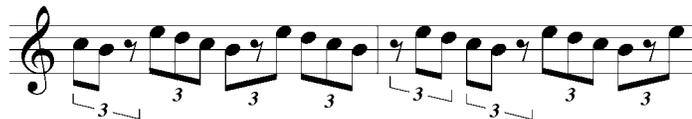


With Pitch




Triplets Phrased in Five in 4/4 (5-Measure Cycle)

With Pitch and Rests



Sixteenth Notes Phrased in Five in 4/4 (5-Measure Cycle)

With Pitch

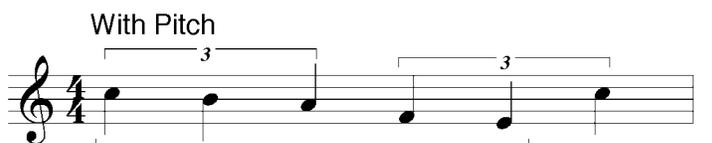









Quarter-Note Triplets Phrased in Five in 4/4 (5-Measure Cycle)

With Pitch






MIXED TRIPLETS IN 4/4 WITH PITCH AND RESTS

In the following etude, the circled number refers to the rhythmic grouping. For example, the etude begins with triplets phrased in four (1-measure cycle). Measure two begins with triplets phrased in five (5-measure cycle).

The improviser is encouraged to create his or her own variations based upon the concept of rhythmic phrasing. While this article included a random sampling of rhythmic units with various pulses in 3/4 and 4/4, other possibilities include the use of other time signatures, polyrhythms, and rhythmic units from two to seven.

For a more in-depth look into the rhythmic concepts covered in this article, check out *Exploration in Rhythm, Volume 1, Rhythmic*

Phrasing in Improvisation by Ed Saindon, published by Advance Music (Germany).

Ed Saindon is a Professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he has been teaching since 1976. He is also active as a clinician on mallet keyboards and jazz improvisation. His latest recording is *Depth of Emotion*, featuring Dave Liebman on soprano sax and Ed on vibes, piano, and marimba in a quartet configuration. For more information, visit www.edsaindon.com or e-mail Ed at edsaindon@comcast.net.

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The image shows five staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. Each staff contains a sequence of eighth-note triplets. The first staff starts with a circled '4' above the first triplet and a circled '5' above the fifth triplet. The second staff has a circled '2' above the eighth triplet. The third staff has a circled '4' above the first triplet and a circled '7' above the seventh triplet. The fourth staff has a circled '4' above the eighth triplet. The fifth staff has a circled '4' above the eighth triplet. Brackets are used to group the notes within each triplet.

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