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**Article 8:  
Inside the Silence**

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## Inside the Silence

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### Conversation 1:

Parent: “How was school today?”

Kid: “OK”

<pause>

Parent: “So, what did you do at school?”

Kid: “Nothin”

<pause> ... <another pause> ...

### Conversation 2:

“Nice weather, yeah it’s warming up, good, cuz it’s been a long winter, amen to that, you ready for summer? yeah, how ‘bout you? yeah, I guess so”

Seems like we often get too much silence (Conversation 1) or not enough (Conversation 2) ...

### **Are We Getting Nervous Yet?**

In a previous article, we discussed the problem of Wall-to-Wall sound – now let’s tackle the flip side: silence in improvisation.

That awkward pause ... why does silence make improvisers so nervous? Here are some possible reasons for this:

► Why does silence  
make improvisers so  
uneasy?

- Silence in verbal conversations can be uncomfortable
- We are conditioned in life to avoid silence – dead air on the radio or TV, teachers who ask questions and immediately answer them, etc.
- When we solo, we often think silence means
  - a) we ran out of ideas,
  - b) we can't handle the current chord or tune correctly, or
  - c) we're not trying hard enough.

Seems like we are conditioned in life to avoid silence in social situations – and jazz performance could certainly qualify as a social situation. So how do we get past an awkward relationship with silence? Step one might be to understand more about “silence” in music ...

### Degrees of Silence – Texture, Density, Dynamics

There are actually degrees of silence, related to texture and density in music. We usually think of silence as being *absolute*, but texture and density can also lend a *relative* quality to silence.

► What is relative silence?

#### Texture and Silence

With texture, we think of *layers* of sound, from zero (total silence) to one player, two players, or three or more playing at the same time. This layered / vertical approach is a new way of thinking about sound and silence. Young jazz groups typically think of the glass as all full or all empty, instead of in millions of degrees of fullness (or emptiness).

Here are some texture areas to explore:

- Have one rhythm section instrument lay out for a while
- Experiment with duets or trios within a combo tune.

Even full textures can have variety. “Repetitive full” (where everyone plays basically at the same level for the whole tune) gets tiring and monotonous; “variety full” can be exhilarating. Variety in texture can include:

- Sound shifts for each RS instrument (playing different styles or switching sound qualities)
- Multiple soloists at once
- Riffing or background patterns.

Each combo player should be constantly aware of texture possibilities in a tune, and be willing and ready to drop out or step in as the musical situation requires.

### Density and Silence

Within each layer there is always a mixture of sound and silence, again with millions of degrees. Unfortunately, the “density meter” is usually cranked up to full and left there for most tunes.

The best way to get a handle on density is to use SHAPE, to clearly visualize and develop musical patterns. (See *The Art of Improvisation* for details on SHAPE and development). Silence then becomes an important boundary around musical shapes, not just an awkward or accidental pause. As shapes become more clear and pronounced, the need for filling up space and time diminishes, and organized beauty begins to take over.

Remember that long improvised lines carry a lot of responsibility for content, just like long sentences do.

### Dynamics and Silence

Soft playing “feels” more like silence. Effective soft playing demands a good balance in sound levels and density; otherwise silence on any one player’s part is less effective. Encourage dynamics in your groups as an effective bridge between sound and silence.

### **The Value of Silence in Solos**

The right amount of silence around your ideas helps you and the audience capture and absorb what you just played. Too much silence usually feels boring; too little silence usually feels overwhelming. Although each listener has his or her own threshold for silence and sound, you control the timing and amounts of silence.

Ballads are a great practice ground for silence; so are stop time and solo breaks (see *The Art of Improvisation*). Remember that time is more imagined than played during silence – it must still be strong.

To get the rhythm section’s attention, try starting your solo a bar or more late (after the beginning of the chorus). It’s surprising how much they will perk up their musical ears – and then the responsibility is yours to say something worth waiting for. (And that’s not as hard as it might seem, if you use SHAPE to guide you.) But if you have nothing interesting to say, a wait won’t really help you.

### **Silence and Momentum**

One reason soloists are “afraid to take a break” is that they think silence will kill the momentum or energy they have built up so far in the solo. So how do you maintain energy and still use silence effectively? Here are a few tips you can use from time to time:

- ◆ **Tip 1:** Use development wisely. When the listener hears an interesting idea developed, the silence around each varied repetition can pull the energy ahead.
- ◆ **Tip 2:** End an idea on a color note or non-harmonic tone. The ending tension feels like it wants to be resolved in the next idea, which pulls the solo along. Conversely, ending an idea on the root or fifth, or on beat 1 or 3, can be like putting a period at the end of a sentence.
- ◆ **Tip 3:** Fragment an idea. Each fragmentation contains an inner energy that creates suspense and tension. For ideas on how to use this technique, see “Fragmentation” in Chapter 2C of *The Art of Improvisation*.

Wisely placed silence draws attention to what we say, musically. So, there is an ironic “safety” in wall-to-wall sound – there’s little chance for the listener to find a foothold to absorb and analyze what’s being played. But musical shapes defined with silence invite participation – rhythms, pitches, and shapes all come into clearer focus. Sure, you can analyze and appreciate long solo lines, but it becomes a tiring task over time.

Lack of silence often means lack of development. Sure, you can develop long ideas, but it’s harder to do – so most soloists take the “easy” way out, playing long lines and skipping the development process.

### Maybe It’s TOO Quiet in Here ...

▶ How much silence is too much?

Here are some cases where silence goes a bit too far ...

- When there’s too much of it overall. For example, an up-tempo tune suffers when a soloist uses silence for long stretches.
- When it’s used in predictable spots. For example, pausing each time in the same place in the bar – or same bar in the chorus – can kill momentum.
- When you’ve got a good thing going. I hear this problem happen so many times with newer improvisers – they play a cool idea once, and maybe develop it once (and the rhythm section catches on) ... and they immediately drop the idea and go on to something totally different. What a missed opportunity! Soon the rhythm section (and audience) will stop expecting the solo to build, and instead expect a form of “arrested development” as the norm.

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I hope you’ve enjoyed this look at silence and the role it plays in improvisation. Encourage your students to use silence, texture, and density wisely – and you’ll *hear* the difference.