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**Article 21:
 Making the Most of
 Sequences**

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Making the Most of Sequences

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

When you take the cover off your computer, you find a collection of interesting devices – motherboard, chips, drives, and fans, to name a few. When you take apart a musical pattern, you’ll find an assortment of *sequences* – and for improvisers, those can be a lot of fun to play with.

First, let’s take a look at the basics and variations of sequences; then I’ll share an approach that can help you bridge the gap between typical improvisation sequences, and powerful melodic development.

Step 1: The Basics of Sequences

A *sequence* is the foundation of a melodic pattern. A sequence is the repetition of a motif that starts on a different pitch. A sequence typically changes the pitches but not the rhythm of the motif. The example below is a melodic pattern built on a simple motif followed by three sequences:

0 ----- 1===== 2===== 3=====

Motif ... 3 ascending diatonic sequences

This is the type of sequencing we’re most familiar with; you put a few sequences together and make a pattern from it. The example above is pretty basic; you can vary the original motif to create thousands of motifs if you want.

The starting pitches in each sequence can move up (ascending pattern), or down (descending pattern), regardless of whether the notes inside the sequences move up or down.

This basic approach to sequencing is overused in the improvisation world. You can get a lot of books full of jazz patterns (Coker's "Patterns for Jazz" comes to mind), and the basic approach is the same – take a group of 4 notes or so, sequence it, and you've got a pattern. Don't misunderstand – there are lots of great patterns out there waiting to be played, but confining yourself to the traditional, exact motif-sequence approach eventually leads to a dead-end in your solo development.

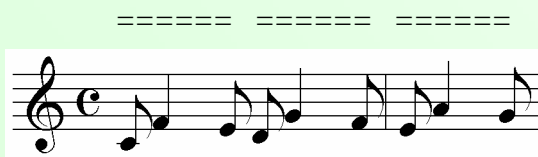
Step 2 – Creating Sequences on the Fly

Once you're comfortable with the basic approach, the next step is to start creating your own patterns "on the fly" in your solos. This can be a somewhat scary thing at first, because it means that you're leaving the security blanket of pre-learned patterns to venture out on your own. But the basics still work the same – you play a short motif and then sequence it up or down.

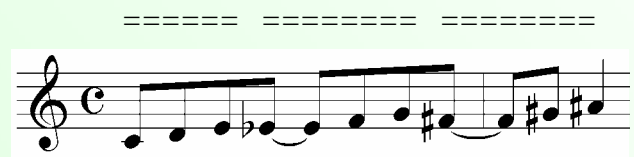
The goal here is to start easy and build confidence with well-executed patterns. Instead of all eighth-notes, start with something easier for your sequences, such as two eighths and a quarter, or a quarter and two eighths, or even three quarter-note triplets.

As you get the hang of it, expand to constant eighths and then try a variety of rhythms. The SHAPE principle (See, Hear, And Play Expressively) can help you visualize how your sequences are unfolding, giving you greater control over direction and execution. Work hard to develop your patterns and integrate them into your overall ideas, so they really sound like they belong in the solo.

Here are a few pattern examples that use different rhythms:



Diatonic pattern, alternate rhythms



Transposing pattern, alternate rhythms



3-note offset pattern, alternate rhythms

► What are semi-sequences, and how do I use them?

Step 3 – Using Semi-Sequences

Semi-sequences are a great way to open the door to variations and development in your patterns. They can be a very powerful tool for your solos, as they can give the listener a feeling of both repetition and surprise at once. That’s a great combination!

There are three basic types of semi-sequences:

- 1) The contour of the sequence is the same as the motif, except that one or more intervals change in the sequence. The rhythms remain the same.
- 2) The pitches remain the same in the sequence, but the rhythms change somewhat.
- 3) Both pitches and rhythms change in the sequence.

Here are a few examples of semi-sequences with interval changes (indicated with underlines).

The image contains four musical examples of semi-sequences in treble clef, 4/4 time. Each example consists of a single staff of music. The first example shows a motif of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. An underline is placed under the interval between D4 and E4. Below the staff are three equals signs (===). The second example shows a motif of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The interval between D4 and E4 is underlined. A triplet of eighth notes is shown above the staff, starting on D4 and ending on F4. Below the staff are five equals signs (=====). The third example shows a motif of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. An underline is placed under the interval between D4 and E4. Below the staff are three equals signs (===). The fourth example shows a motif of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. An underline is placed under the interval between D4 and E4. Below the staff are five equals signs (=====).

Step 4 – SHAPE and Long Sequences

This is where the creative juices really get flowing – creating and developing with longer sequences. By “longer,” I mean the motif is at least one to two measures long (and so is each sequence).

Playing longer sequences obviously requires some sharp musical vision, as you need to 1) create a long but interesting motif, 2) remember that motif accurately, and 3) sequence it – exactly, or with variations. The key to this is using SHAPE to visualize, create, and repeat your ideas effectively. Remember that you can include longer notes, articulations, trills, effects, triplets and more in any of your longer motifs and sequences.

The results can be quite liberating! Try it for yourself – slowly at first – and you’ll see what I mean.

I recently listened to a recording of “Don’t Worry about a Thing”, with a solo by alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, from the album “Jazz Goes to College.” I’m a big Desmond fan; I like the way he creates ideas, using subtle inflections (and often semi-sequences) to develop them. In this recording, he flawlessly plays a number of longer sequences that carry his solo along with an effortless feeling (although it does take a lot of effort and concentration to cleanly execute long sequences).

Another artist who is a master at using long sequences is Wynton Marsalis. You can find examples of long sequences in many of his recordings.

Here are a few pointers on working with longer sequences:

- The more interesting your long motif is to begin with, the more interest you can generate with long sequences. Then the challenge becomes how to remember (and see) the idea better so you can make choices of how (or if) to vary the sequences as you go.
- If you have trouble completely remembering a longer motif you just played, focus on its contour (shape) and rhythms – you can always “improvise” some of the sequence pitches, and it will sound like you meant it that way.
- You can use the longer sequences as jumping off places for new ideas and development. The possibilities are endless here.

Enjoy your sequences – and make the most of them!