

The Contrast Method

Improvisation is an individual art. Each person by nature will improvise differently because every person is different. Improvisation is an intuitive art form, so the only way to improve as an improviser is to develop your intuition, train it, give it more tools, and options to draw from in the heat of the moment. This will give you more powerful abilities to shape and control your improvisation and connect with an audience.

What follows is a method to develop your intuition based upon the language concepts and the forms covered in this class. By devoting time each day to these exercises, your improvisation abilities will improve along with all your musical skills. The most important thing to remember is that this method can be practiced by anyone at any level of ability and any level of music theory knowledge.

Critical Analysis Control Exercises

In order to perform the critical analysis control exercises, we must have a **context**. The context is the form, or song that will be improvised on. A context can be a form, like the 12 bar blues, or a song, such as "All The Things You Are" or "Living On A Prayer". A context can also be a simple one chord vamp, or four bar repeating progression.

The next requirement is a **topic**. A topic can be as simple as **harmonic accuracy** or as complex as **motivic development**. Within every topic there are control exercises that improve your ability to improvise with that topic.

Once you have selected a topic, it is time for the **control exercise** to be designed based upon the set **parameters**. The parameters begin with the simplest version of what can be done with a topic and become more complex as your control within that topic grows. Exercises begin with one or two parameters and progress to include more parameters.

This sounds like a lot to follow when written on paper, but in practice it is quite simple. When you have designed an exercise, it is time to practice that exercise and listen back for critical analysis. The method below is a form you can follow for any exercise on any topic:

Step Task Example

1	Select Context	Jazz Blues in F
2	Record 2 min version of context	2-3 Choruses of the changes
3	Select Topic	Range, playing high and low on the instrument
4	Design Control Exercise	Play one phrase in the lowest register of the the instrument, REST, then play one phrase in the highest register of the instrument. REST and repeat.
5	Perform the exercise using your prerecorded context	Follow the exercise while improvising over 2-3 choruses of the F Blues
6	Listen back to what you played and evaluate how well you executed the exercise.	Were the LOW phrases in the lowest register? Were the HIGH phrases in the highest register? Was there a clear rest in between the phrases?
7	Repeat the process and evaluate how your control develops	Awareness of register increases and you are able to add a third parameter, such as middle register to the exercise. Mix the phrases and vary the combinations.

If you repeated this exercise several times a day for many days, your control over the register of the instrument would increase dramatically. The next step would be to add a third parameter, such as playing a phrase in the middle register. Then you can combine the phrases, for example if register is our topic, below is an example of how to practice two-phrase combinations in increasingly complex ways. Keep in mind the importance of placing a rest between phrases.

First Phrase Beginning	First Phrase End	Second phrase Beginning	Second Phrase End
Low	Low	High	High
Low	High	High	Low

First Phrase Beginning	First Phrase End	Second phrase Beginning	Second Phrase End
Low	Middle	High	Middle
High	Middle	High	Low

And there are more! So we can see that by using just one topic and three parameters we can create nearly endless types of phrases that cross the entire register of the instrument and force you to gain control over this topic. Notice we are only using two phrases here, and we have kept the context the same, an F Blues. As these exercises become easier and easier, we can change the context. Suddenly, the exercise that had become easy over a medium tempo F Blues is now difficult when played on uptempo Giant Steps!

Thus, we now have a process, a method by which to practice improvisation and even more important, a device designed to measure that improvement in a tangible way, that gives instant feedback to the performer and allows them to consistently target improvement. The only way to learn this method and profit from it is to relentlessly practice it and focus on the critical analysis. As the most difficult part is topic selection and exercise design, the next page lists a wide range of topics, exercises and parameters that are a natural starting point for using this method.