

An Examination of Oliver Nelson's "Patterns for Improvisation"

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Introduction

Oliver Nelson published "Patterns for Improvisation" in 1966. It is a collection of 81 exercises designed to build technique as well as fundamental vocabulary used in jazz improvisation. As the original promotional material states, "This tremendous resource helps spell out some of the basic building blocks of the jazz language" Nelson goes on to state in his introductory notes to the exercises that, "the patterns in this book ... will give the player flexibility in all keys and the confidence to cope with almost any musical situation."

In his liner notes to the Mosaic Records release of "Oliver Nelson: The Argo, Verve, and Impulse Big Band Sessions", saxophonist Kenny Berger discusses the origin of the book. During a cruise ship gig with organist Wild Bill Davis, rough seas impacted the ship's generators leading to fluctuations in the pitch of the organ. The situation required Nelson to continually transpose during the gig to match the organ's key. From this experience, Nelson realized the need to develop fluency in all 12 keys which became one of the motivations for writing the book.

This presentation examines the book from 3 different perspectives. In the first case, the exercises in the book are examined to show the structure and logic of each exercise. In the second case, an example of the influence of one of the exercises on an improvised phrase in a Phil Woods solo is presented. Finally, several exercises toward the end of the book form the basis for compositions that Nelson recorded.

Technical Fluency Exercises

Exercises 1, 3, 5, and 6 are examples of exercises designed to develop technical fluency in all 12 keys. These types of exercises are common in various Daily Studies method books. For example, Nelson's exercise 5 is the same as exercise 2 in Hanon's "The Virtuoso Pianist." The purpose of these types of exercises is to develop finger dexterity in all keys and throughout the range of the instrument

1-2-3-5 Patterns

Exercises 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 22, and 33 explore various permutations of scale degrees 1-2-3-5. Exercise 2 is a familiar pattern used extensively by John Coltrane in his solo on "Giant Steps." The other exercises explore different permutations of the scale degrees (e.g. 5-3-2-1), changing the pattern to a minor key, or exploring different root movements (e.g. around the cycle of fourths).

Triad patterns

There are numerous patterns that use triads as their primary constituent. Examples include exercises 16, 17, and 27-31. Exercises 16 and 17 use a lower chromatic approach note to a major triad and either ascend or descend with chromatic root movement. Exercises 27-31 feature triads with various root movements. Exercises 27 and 28 explore root movement by a tritone, while 29-31 use ascending or descending chromatic motion.

Diminished and whole tone scale patterns

Exercises 46-53 contain various patterns related to diminished chords and scales. Exercises 46 and 47 utilize diminished chords, Exercise 48 uses the diminished scale, and the remaining exercises sequence 4-note cells in minor 3rd root movements. Exercise 62 and 62-A use the whole scale.

ii-V patterns

Most of the exercises in the book are not intended to be used over a particular set of chord changes. Nelson himself stated in the introduction of the book, "Please bear in mind that most of the patterns in this book will not fit the bridge to 'Cherokee'." However, Exercises 64 and 65 work nicely over a ii-V progression.

Example of a pattern used in an improvised solo

Phil Woods and Oliver Nelson were friends and Woods was a key member of Nelson's band in the 1960s. This section examines an exercise and its possible inspiration for an improvised phrase in a Phil Woods solo.

An excerpt from Exercise 34 is shown below:



Below is a transcription of a phrase Phil Woods plays on the bridge of "Secret Love" from the recording, "Movie Song Project" by the Royce Campbell Trio featuring Phil Woods:



The similarity to the exercise is noticeable with some differences. While the exercise uses a chromatic root movement, Woods moves the original idea down in whole steps to match the chord changes of the bridge. He also varies the end of the phrase. In the first phrase, he resolves the line to the major third. In the second phrase, he plays a phrase that outlines an F major tonality and the ends the phrase shifting to F minor over the Bb7 chord.

Woods certainly did not preconceive using this pattern explicitly thinking to himself that he should use Nelson's Exercise 34 on the bridge. However, Woods was surely familiar with the book and there are instances of other improvised phrases that may have been inspired by the book. Having internalized the material through practice, Woods is able to use that material as part of his vocabulary and alter it as needed during improvisation.

Compositions

Several of the exercises toward the end of the book became compositions that Nelson recorded. The chart below identifies the exercise number and corresponding composition.

Exercise	Composition	Recording
77	Bopol	The Spirit of '76 (Impulse!)
78	Example 78	Sound Pieces (Impulse!)
79	Patterns For Orchestra	Oliver Nelson: Verve Jazz Masters 48
81	Blues and the Abstract Truth	More Blues and the Abstract Truth (Impulse!)

Summary

- This presentation examined Oliver Nelson's "Patterns for Improvisation"
- Patterns were characterized by their type and purpose
- An influence of a particular pattern on an improvised solo by Phil Woods was demonstrated
- Several exercises became recorded compositions (playlist available)

More Information

For more information about Jeff Rzepiela, visit his website containing over 75 solo transcriptions, several big band arrangements, and a copy of this presentation: www.scooby-sax.com