

PLAYING BY NUMBERS

There is a guide to painting for beginners called *Painting by numbers*. A similar technique can be used for jazz, although this is not aimed specifically at people just starting to learn. Anyone who can play an instrument can do this. All that is required is an open mind, a good ear and a lot of concentration.

The object is to create a sort of sound picture, where each musician has an independent role to play. The idea came to me on thinking about classical music. When a composer wants to create an effect or to develop a section of the music, he or she has to write all the notes down to produce what is required. I am convinced that jazz musicians with a little bit of direction could do the same job relying entirely upon their improvisational skills.

I said the word 'direction' because this is not something that can be done at random, although there is still a lot of freedom involved. It has to be carefully organised beforehand to be at all effective.

What it involves is this. On a blank piece of paper (not manuscript paper) draw a rectangle. This represents one of the players. It should not be very tall, in fact the height of it is not very important. What is important is the length, as this indicates how long that person has to play in respect to the length of the paper which is the total duration of the piece. Label the rectangle according to the instrument concerned and inside it write down what you want that person to ad lib on, such as a chord or a scale. It is important that the players stick to these directions, otherwise the whole thing can fall apart.

Now draw another rectangle above or below it indicating what you want someone else to play. Higher-sounding instruments should logically be placed higher up on the page and vice versa. This rectangle can be shorter or longer than the other one and can start or finish in a different place - it's best that it does. To enable each player to focus on their own rectangle you can colour-code it, for instance with a highlighter, or mark it in some other way to distinguish it from others.

Carry on adding rectangles for however many players you want to be involved. This works best with instruments of different tone colours to help identify the different lines. Remember that the ear can only follow three or sometimes four separate lines, and not all of this will be focussed upon at once. If you want a confused sound, however, you could choose the same or similar instruments or increase the number of people playing at the same time.

You don't have to limit yourself to just one rectangle per player. There can be several ones with horizontal gaps in between where other rectangles overlap.

It is also possible to give each player the same or a different phrase to develop, in which case you will need to cut some manuscript paper and stick it in the rectangles.

All the players are provided with the same diagram so they know exactly what is happening and can interact with each other. Time, however, is relative - each person starts or stops according to their position in relation to other players' stints, rather than adhere to a predetermined span of time.

The parts played by rhythm section players, if they are included, will reflect what others are playing. Unless directed specifically not to play, they will play the whole time, uniting the other elements. A bass line for instance could be on a single scale, a riff, or totally free. What the piano would play would be a blend of what is going on or totally free.

Other things can usefully be added to this scheme. Intensity, which reflects the number of notes played, the volume and perhaps the tempo, can be represented by a horizontal line. Where the line is dotted, it is low intensity. Where the intensity is greatest, the line will be wavy.

Other indications can be given to individual players and noted in their rectangles, such as volume or a particular register you want the instrument to play in.

The results can produce varying degrees of dissonance and should be interesting not only to perform but to hear. Although there will be moments which do not gel well, these will be offset by times which are awe-inspired. These are the moments to remember and to build upon.

This device can be used for its own sake as a piece in its own right or it could be used as an intro or a passage within another more conventional piece. Try it and see for yourself.

An example is given on the next page. To view it horizontally, go to Document at the top and click on Rotate Pages or press ctrl+R.

FLUTE
C sus 4

Bb7 (#9)

TRUMPET
HARMON G7

Fm7

TENOR
F#69

B7

TROMBONE E°

C sus 4

INTENSITY

