

# **patterns for improvisation**

**by oliver nelson**



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# OLIVER NELSON

June 4, 1932 - October 27, 1975

Composer, arranger, conductor and instrumentalist Oliver Nelson travelled a long way from his home town of St. Louis via Washington University and such world-renowned orchestras as Erskine Hawkins, Quincy Jones, Count Basie and Duke Ellington, as well as throughout the world itself... Europe, the Far East and Africa.

He composed original theme music for movies and television - Chase, Longstreet, Six Million Dollar Man and others.

He arranged and conducted for such all-time greats as Louis Armstrong, Steve Allen, Lena Horne, Cannonball Adderly and Herbie Mann. He was voted Best Arranger in the Downbeat Readers' Poll of 1967 and 1968. He received the Edison Award and *Grand Gala du Disque*, Amsterdam, 1965.



Oliver Nelson was selected by the United States State Department to tour Africa with a sextet as a cultural presentation in 1961. He also conducted courses in television film scoring and arranging and improvising at various universities.

His major works include: *Soundpiece for Orchestra*, Radio Stuttgart, 1964 ... *Jazzhattan Suite* for the City of New York, 1967 ... *Berlin Dialogues for Orchestra*, commissioned by *Berliner Jazztage* for the City of West Berlin, 1970.



## INTRODUCTION

First of all, it will be necessary to clear up one important point before the student makes any attempt to play through these patterns: The approach to this book is based on a Jazz attitude and unless otherwise indicated, *all* examples are to be played with a melodic, legato, Jazz concept.



Ex. 1, if played by a classically trained performer, would be played staccato simply because of the absence of legato markings. As almost all of these examples are notated without these markings, please bear in mind that they are not to be played in a classical manner.

It is also assumed that the student has already mastered the Major and Minor Scales, the construction of simple chords and their inversions, plus an understanding of music forms, etc.

A sequence is a repetition of a pattern on different scale steps. As long as the original pattern is correct, any irregularities which might appear in its sequence are justified...

If the above statement is true, then the music of Bach, Beethoven, Bartok, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, even some of today's electronic music is constructed much in the same manner. The use of sequential musical devices is not by any means dry and mechanical, but can be a useful aid in the art of improvisation, with or without inspiration and immense natural talent.

Inspiration to a 20th Century Composer is nothing more than working with his materials until the pieces fit properly. Natural talent to John Coltrane is long and tedious hours of practice and great insight and understanding of the materials of music. These materials are Musical Form and Construction, Chords, Combination Chords and their variants, the use of Modal Melodic approaches, and the ability

to improvise with split second timing with ease and confidence.

A performer who improvises has two or more choices to select when called upon to play. One is to play the chords vertically as in the case of Coleman Hawkins. Another, to play melodically and horizontally as Lester Young did. Still another would be to play freely; that is to ignore the melody, chords, time, form, etc. One desirable approach is to construct a solo based upon the tune or piece you are playing. To select a motif and build upon it, expanding it until it becomes a new composition created from the old one.

## Attitudes Concerning Time And Time Signatures In Music

*Time Signatures:* In most older forms of music, plus a great deal of today's popular music, certain notes will melodically be more important than others. These more important notes appear to have more Accent than the lesser important ones and this accent generally occurs at some regular interval. This grouping of musical sounds by means of accent produces one of the more important elements in music - *Time*. Time and Tempo are not the same and must not be thought of as such. *Tempo* is the rate of speed at which a musical composition is to be performed, (slow, fast). These patterns of strong and weak accents are called *Beats* and the most common patterns produced, depending upon the recurrence of the strong accent, generally contain two, three and four beats. This is called Duple time, Triple and Quadruple time.

In order to indicate to a performer what time a piece of music is to be played in, we place a *Time Signature* at the beginning of the composition.

$\frac{4}{4}$  or  $\frac{6}{4}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , etc.

The upper figure indicates the number of beats in a measure. The lower figure indicates the kind of note to be used for each beat. The length of time a musical sound lasts is called *Duration*. When each beat of a measure is divisible by two, the time is called *Simple Time*. Therefore we have:

Simple Duple Time,

$\frac{2}{2}$   $\frac{2}{4}$   $\frac{3}{8}$



Simple Triple Time,  
 $\frac{3}{2}$   $\frac{3}{4}$   $\frac{3}{8}$   
 Simple Quadruple Time,  
 $\frac{4}{2}$   $\frac{4}{4}$   $\frac{4}{8}$

When the beats of a measure are dotted, the time is called Compound Time. We have:

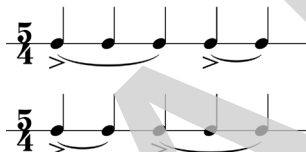
Compound Duple Time,  
 $\frac{6}{4}$   $\frac{6}{8}$   $\frac{6}{16}$   
 Compound Triple Time,  
 $\frac{9}{4}$   $\frac{9}{8}$   $\frac{9}{16}$   
 Compound Quadruple Time,  
 $\frac{12}{4}$   $\frac{12}{8}$   $\frac{12}{16}$

If the student has already looked over some of the pages in this book, he might have noticed a few time signatures which are not covered in the paragraphs concerning Duple and Triple time and their variants:

$\frac{7}{4}$   $\frac{7}{16}$   $\frac{5}{4}$

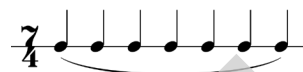
It is generally felt that  $\frac{5}{4}$  time is a combination of  $\frac{3}{4}$  plus  $\frac{2}{4}$  or  $\frac{2}{4}$  plus  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

This would stress the accents in the following manner:

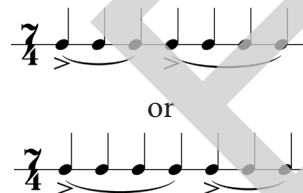


We should think in terms of Beats instead of placing so much emphasis on Accents (strong or weak), as the key to how a piece is to be played.

Ex. 43 - Page 34 is in  $\frac{7}{4}$  and is to be thought of in the following manner:



It is not to be thought of as indicated below:



The same musical attitude shall apply to Ex. 44 - Page 35 and Ex. 45 - Page 36.

Most of the examples in this book have no tempo indications as I felt that many of the illustrations shown are flexible enough to allow for some freedom of expression. This means unless indicated, they may be played as fast or as slowly as the performer wishes. The only exceptions are Ex. 77, Ex. 80 and Ex. 81. They are to be played fast, but how fast is again left up to the ability and the desires of the performer.



One use of a pattern is this example which utilizes the chords to the bridge of “Cherokee”:

M.M.  $\text{♩} = 112$

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of M.M.  $\text{♩} = 112$ . It consists of four systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The key signature is D major (two sharps). The first system shows a melodic line in the treble and a harmonic accompaniment in the bass. The second and third systems continue the melody and accompaniment. The fourth system concludes the piece with a final chord. A large, light gray watermark 'SAMPLE' is diagonally across the score.

Please bear in mind that most of the patterns in this book will not fit the bridge to “Cherokee,” but, they will give the player flexibility in all keys and the confidence to cope with almost any musical situation.

*Oliver Nelson*

*July, 1966*

Ex. 1

Ex. 1 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time, consisting of four measures. The first measure starts on C4 and ascends stepwise to G4. The second measure starts on G4 and ascends stepwise to D5. The third measure starts on D5 and descends stepwise to G4. The fourth measure starts on G4 and descends stepwise to C4. The exercise is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

Ex. 2

Ex. 2 is a musical exercise in 4/4 time, consisting of eight measures. The first four measures are identical to Ex. 1. The fifth measure starts on C4 and ascends stepwise to G4. The sixth measure starts on G4 and ascends stepwise to D5. The seventh measure starts on D5 and descends stepwise to G4. The eighth measure starts on G4 and descends stepwise to C4. The exercise is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

Ex. 3



Ex. 4





Ex. 15

Ex. 15 is a musical exercise consisting of 9 measures, written in treble clef with a 16-measure time signature. The exercise is divided into three groups of three measures each. The first group starts with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second group changes to two sharps (F# and C#). The third group changes to one flat (Bb). The exercise features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. A large, light gray watermark is visible across the center of the page.

Ex. 44

The musical score for Ex. 44 consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a 7/16 time signature, and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music is written in eighth and sixteenth notes, with various accidentals (sharps, flats, and naturals) indicating chromaticism. The notation includes many beamed sixteenth notes, suggesting a fast, rhythmic piece. A large, light gray watermark is overlaid diagonally across the center of the page, partially obscuring the music.