

TIME FOR IMPROVISORS:
some thoughts on time signatures, tempo, and synchrony

-G. Radai 5/3/2006

One of the chief aspects of a musical performance is its relationship to real time. A fine sense of timing is a crucial necessary characteristic of the performer. Compositions are notated with strict reference to note groupings that indicate a “time signature” and which help to characterize a regular rhythmic feeling. A composer also uses shifts in tempo within a piece as a dramatic device, to express a range of emotions from sensual languidity or funereal solemnity to harried anguish or violent aggression or virulent joy. Beats-per-measure are notated along with accent notes that tell the players how fast or slow to play. Multiple musical voices can move independently of one another in time and also express tempo variations independently, or be in tight lock-step with one another or anywhere in between.

This can all be thought out ahead of the execution of the composition or performance, but how is the improvising musician to use the tools of timing and tempo and synchrony or asynchrony in *their* craft?

In the PB system, where one musician takes on the role of conductor when it is their turn in the rotation, the burden is to adequately set forth the start tempo and time signature through some means from direct communication to played-by-example. If your fellow musicians and yourself can understand direct communications like “start with a fast samba in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, segue to “B” section doing a medium-slow reggae in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, and then recap to the beginning” then you have an effective means for at least starting off on the same page together. Of course, individuals are bound to interpret things like “medium-slow reggae” through their filter of experience, but that often provides the desirable leeway that gives a piece of improvisation a degree of freedom within a structure. If the musicians are well-experienced on their instruments and also possess a good “ear” then merely playing an example couple of measures for them should convey more than enough information to again start off together. The beginning in this sense is the easy part, for the conductor, at least.

The accompanists, however, are not restricted to the foundational tempo or time signature at all—in fact, their musical response may be to play “off” the foundation, taking their tempo to be some fraction or multiple of the base tempo. Their response may be to play counter-rhythms, or playing only syncopated accents based on the rhythm and tempo. One could even play poly-rhythmically, introducing an entirely different time signature for one’s own part, playing for instance a $\frac{5}{4}$ melody over a $\frac{4}{4}$ groove. All these responses are fair game in a free improvisation.

If the question remains “why choose one over the other” then the improviser needs to realize that their sensitivity to the music as it is building in real-time is the place to find inspiration, as it is all other times that one is improvising. Remember that manipulation of time in a piece can define an emotional range, in several dimensions, not just of speed, but also of density and transparency and weight. From somber to jaunty, from spare to thick, from light to dense, an acute understanding of the tools of tempo and time manipulation are very important for any musician that would improvise.