

## CHAPTER EIGHT: MOTIVIC DEVELOPMENT

This chapter serves as a reference for bassists who improvise or compose. I believe that this should apply to **all** bassists, and indeed should also be of interest to all musicians. Improvisation and composition are integral parts of total musicianship.

It is my deep belief that satisfaction in improvisation and composition comes to the musician not only from the content of the story which is told, but also the clarity with which the ideas are communicated. That is, the process is as important as the content itself. It is my aim to use a language of expression which is both sophisticated and clear. I believe musicians should strive for optimal clarity in their expression regardless of the depth, type or complexity of the emotions felt. Furthermore, as each person is different, we should all strive to foster our unique personal styles which bear our characteristic “stamp”.

### THE ELEMENTS OF FORM

Motivic development has primary importance in creating satisfying improvisations and compositions. In order to support this postulation, we need talk about form. Any creative work (be it music, architecture, or poetry) has a *form* or *structure*. This form is the product of three fundamental elements:

1. **Repetition**
2. **Contrast**
3. **Development**

The balance and interplay of these three elements create a form which we may find pleasing, boring, exciting, tiring, etc. It might even be totally unintelligible! It can be said that the first element, that of repetition, is relatively easy to induce into a form. It just requires saying the same thing over and over again. A uniformly coloured brick wall is an example of a building structure that repeats the same brick layout over and over. Similarly, the second element of contrast seems to occur easily, as it takes little thought to string together a host of unrelated words or concepts. The element of development, however, occupies most creative artists’ focus and energy. It is with this element that a sense of journey or the passing of time can be really created and communicated to an audience. In development, an idea grows and takes on new aspects while referring to its starting point. Development contains within it both the elements of repetition (the familiar) and contrast (the new).

Form is typically notated using capital letters to stand for each section. A section can be a grouping of pulses, motive, phrase, regular group of bars, chorus, or anything at all! Part of the challenge here is deciding what resolution is the most meaningful to examine the piece. It is possible that you need to look more micro- or macroscopically in order to find true meaning in the form or structure.

Here are some examples of the formal elements represented by letters:

1. Repetition: A A A
2. Contrast: A B C D E
3. Development: A A’ A”

Of course, most forms combine all three elements. Take a typical song form, for example: A A’ B A”

As an illustration of how a change in resolution of analysis can bring meaning to a form, take the following example, which is my analysis of the form of a tabla composition:

A B A C D A B A E F A B A C D A

Can you decrease the resolution to a form with only 8 letters? From this form can you further decrease the resolution to something with only 3 letters?!

In classical music theory there are terms for different classic forms, such as binary (AB), ternary (ABA), rondo (ABACA), arch (ABCBA), etc. These forms are good to know as they appear in other styles too.

### WHAT IS A MOTIVE?

At the heart of motivic development is the *motive* - the “seed” idea which is first established and then referred back to. In musical terms, this idea is typically a gestural phrase with a particular rhythm and pitch contour or shape. It is important that the musician learns how to create motives which are just the right length and complexity: too long, and the idea is too mature to be developed further; too short, and the motive will not have enough character to inspire further thought. I suggest a good, typical motive is approximately 3 to 5 notes long.

Apart from its length, you may ask what constitutes a good, memorable motive? Good question! To get a “feel” for what constitutes a good motive, I recommend that bassists listen to the more lyrical improvisers and songwriters, of which there are many. Start by listening to the piano solos of Bill Evans, the lyrics of Sting, the Chorales of J.S. Bach, the symphonies of the great Classical composers, the improvisations of Indian Classical musicians, the bass lines of Oscar Pettiford, and the guitar solos of Jim Hall. More sophisticated motives can often be heard in the lyrics of Björk and Joni Mitchell, and the solos of Eric Dolphy. There are many examples of great motives!