

“Forest Duos” and other textures and structures for group improvisation

Allan Chase

Forest

Before trying the “Forest Duos” piece or structure, it’s important to practice the Forest texture and have agreement on what it is. All of these things are negotiable and anyone is welcome to come up with variations, but if the definitions are unclear, people will become confused and lose their place in the form, which can make the piece break down or cause dead spaces where people are distracted or hesitant.

Forest is a texture where **each player strictly repeats a short figure**. It should be as strictly repeated as possible, with the repetitions identical in every parameter: pitches, rhythm, the duration of any silence between repetitions, loudness, accents and articulations, timbre, and any other parameter you can control and think of.

In a Forest section, the individual players’ cycles are out of phase with one another, or at least they’re not deliberately in any obvious tempo relationship to one another. It may happen that some players are in the same tempo or simple multiples of the same tempo, and if that happens, they shouldn’t change their figure – whatever you play, you repeat, and you simply listen and observe the relationship your repeating figure has to the other ones in the group.

It’s a good exercise to start many Forests with the group in order to explore possibilities and work out any problems. The leader or teacher can give a visual cue for an ending.

Another way to end is for everyone to continue repeating their figure until they’ve consciously listened to every other figure and heard its cyclical pattern, and then listened to the whole for a while; the group may come to a consensus about when to fade or stop with that instruction in mind.

Two things are important in Forest: strict repetition, and careful listening to all the parts and the whole.

Some thoughts and common problems:

- Dynamics and space should be such that all instruments and voices can be heard.
- Figures should be short and simple enough to be remembered and repeated accurately. Sometimes people will start with overly long or complex figures and fail to repeat them. Typical Forest figures are probably a fraction of a second to ten seconds long, but duration could be variable.
- Players need to take instrumental endurance and breathing into account: don’t start something you can’t repeat for a long time (without injuring yourself, passing out, etc.).
- You can start with a silence; everyone doesn’t have to play on the first downbeat. But the silence and its duration become part of your repeating pattern.
- Try Forests in duos, trios, and other subsets of the ensemble.

- Experiment with order and timing of entrances. See what happens when people enter one at a time, or all at once, or only one waits and enters later.
- Other parameters can be controlled: Forest in F major pentatonic, spoken-word Forest, noise Forest (no definite pitches), etc.
- Try to stimulate more variation and experimentation in the content of each player's Forest figures: vary the duration of the figure, the amount and placement of rests, speed, rhythm, pitch, use of registers, dynamics, timbres, implied feelings (assertive or gentle, etc.).

A Forest can be a piece in itself, or an element of a piece (a section or a layer).

If a Forest has a predetermined or agreed upon common pulse among all the players, it's called a **Grove**. (Grove was a pun on groove and the idea of a humanly-controlled, planned, planted, equally spaced forest.) A common pulse could result from a count-off or conducting, or it could happen by choice when players enter one at a time and choose to agree with the prior players' pulse.

Practicing Improvised Duets ending with Forest

An experienced group might skip this part; once they have a clear idea of what a Forest is, they can try "Forest Duos." But it may help to try this first.

Play freely improvised duos. The musical content of the duet may be anything except the content of Forest: anything but strictly (or confusingly almost-strictly) repeated short musical ideas. When the players are ready to end the duo, they end by playing a Forest. In practice, one will probably begin a Forest figure (any short, strictly repeated figure), and the other will hear it and begin to play their Forest figure. Agree in advance on a way to stop: it could fade, or stop abruptly on either players' cue or the teacher/leader's cue.

The two points here are to explore free duet playing with its vast possibilities for independence, interaction, and musical content; and for both players to always listen attentively while playing, so that neither player misses the exit if the other person begins a Forest.

"Forest Duos"

See the last page for a sample graphic score. Once the group knows Forest and how to transition from a freely improvised duet to a Forest, the basic form is pretty self-explanatory, but there are many possible variations.

The simplest form, but not necessarily the easiest to execute (for reasons I'll explain below) is:

Forest 1: Leader gives a downbeat, and everyone plays a Forest. It lasts until people start Duo 1. You may fade gradually (but not too slowly) or stop abruptly when you hear a Duo.

Duo 1: Don't start a duo until you've had time to really listen to the Forest. Listen long enough to hear everyone's repeating figure, and listen to the whole and its complex phase structure. Then, when it feels right, anyone may connect with a duo partner (by eye contact or some other cue, usually) and begin an improvised duo with them: stop playing your Forest figure and start freely improvising with your chosen duo partner.

(There can be only one improvised duet at a time; if two duos begin, one should stop – like a faux pas when two people try to enter a revolving door at once.)

The Duo players end their duet by beginning a new Forest. The repeating material should be new, not what was in Forest 1.

Forest 2: When everyone hears both Duo 1 players ending their duet by playing a new Forest, they join the new Forest, too, with new repeating material. The timing of entrances is up to the player: people can enter right away, or wait and enter one by one (but not too slowly).

Duo 2: Two different players begin a new improvised duet.

The cycle of Duos and Forests continues until everyone has played in a Duo. End with a Forest and fade out or stop on a cue.

Common problems:

- Especially in larger ensembles, someone may not be aware that a Duo has begun, and therefore they'll keep playing their Forest too long. Good listening, use of space and dynamic control can help make sure everyone can hear the change from Forest to Duo.
- Sometimes one duo partner will not realize the other person has begun a Forest. Part of the skill being developed here is to learn to listen with attention, awareness, engagement, and an open mind, while being creative and playing in a committed, creative way. The transition from Duo to Forest exercises one's ability to improvise while being ready and willing to adapt to another person's change of direction.
- Sometimes one duo partner will think the other has begun a Forest when they don't mean to start one; they may be developing a motive as part of the improvised duet, and that development may sound too much like repetition of a Forest figure. This implies the need to limit repetition in the duet, to avoid misunderstanding about the form.

Some possible variations:

- Players don't have to be excluded from future Duos after they've played in one Duo; that's just one way to make sure everyone has equal time.

- This could continue until all possible duos have played (6 duos for a quartet, 3 for a trio; or 28 for an octet – which would take about 2 hours if the duos and forests are limited to 2 minutes). It’s hard to keep track of whether all possible duos have been played in a larger group, so either a leader should keep track, or the possibilities could be charted on a board or screen, or predetermined.
- Content of Forests can be specified in advance, or cues could be set up for different types of Forests with specific content (a Grove or common-pulse and tempo Forest; a Forest with specific pitch or sound material; orders and pacing of entrances; etc.).
- Instead of a final Forest, a different coda could be planned.

Try recording “Forest Duos” and listening back. The result is often surprising to the ensemble, usually in a good way.

See the example and blank form on the last page (designed for an octet with four duos).

Other ensemble textures:

Note: If you don’t like the programmatic implications of the nicknames for these textures, feel free to make up other names or use numbers, hand cues, etc. Taking off from Forest and Grove, one of my student ensembles favored these natural phenomena as ways of picturing and remembering the textures.

Forest: Short, strictly repeated figures played in individual tempos, not intentionally in phase or common pulse with others’ figures.

Grove: Short, strictly repeated figures played in a common pulse and tempo (but not necessarily the same meter). This may be counted off, or players may join in after one player has established the pulse.

Stars: Pointillistic textures with substantial silence around them; short, isolated sounds or small groups of sounds, with long silences before and after them. A high ratio of silence to sound.

Clouds: Relatively sustained, overlapping sounds: floating chords or colors or washes of sound, with the option of silences (space) before and after them.

Space: Silence.

Storm, Thunder: Eruptions of louder sound or thicker textures, usually once in a piece.

Drone: Sustained, unchanging sounds. To allow for breathing, this can be as sustained as practical, with minimal spaces and changes. These can have specified pitches, or not.

Narma ©: A chorale-like texture that begins on an agreed-upon unison note. It's important that every new note is intentional and "heard" with inner hearing before it's played.

Sky, field, open, or improvisation (solo, duo, trio, full group, etc.): Spaces for improvisation that is not predetermined except possibly in approximate duration, who is playing, and/or how to end or what comes next.

After practicing these individually as a group, and coming up with more of them if you wish, you can try incorporating them into pieces. For example:

- You could create a graphic score or just agree on a sequence of events, and structure an ensemble piece with some agreed-upon textures around improvisations.
- Cues (hand gestures, cards, or audio cues, for example) could be developed to signal certain textures so they could be called upon spontaneously in performance.
- Everyone gets to play a solo and choose their accompanists, and assign the accompanists one of these textures for the accompaniment. Additional parameters could be specified, opening this up to many possible sounds and styles of music. For example, "Grove on G7+9 concert," or "Clouds using any pitches, going into a Forest in Bb Dorian at the end." However, it can be good to keep these simple. The soloist can also specify whether the solo or the accompaniment starts first, and whether the accompanying group starts on cue, or they enter one at a time.
- It can be helpful to specify an approximate duration, unless you're open to some of these going very long and others being very short.
- It can be interesting to explore what existing genres of music can be described with these vague textural guidelines, and whether music that doesn't particularly resemble any existing genre of music can be created.
- You could use these textures as ways to connect composed or improvised pieces or sections in a set or concert.
- Any and all of these can be combined, expanded, added to, and made into pieces for any kind of ensemble at any level of instrumental or vocal ability and improvisational experience. These ideas can be adapted for children and beginners, and some may work well with accomplished musicians who are new to group improvisation.

History and Sources:

“Forest Duos” is a piece or structure for improvisation that I developed for my ensembles at New England Conservatory from 1995 to 2009, especially my Duo Ensembles. Students contributed to the nicknames for textures and came up with many experiments and variations in the form. Students in my Large Avant-Garde Ensemble at Berklee, 1983-88, also contributed to experiments with similar structures for improvisation.

The ideas behind this, and many of the other ideas for textures and structures, come mainly from years of exploring improvisation structures with my fellow members of the collective Your Neighborhood Saxophone Quartet (YNSQ), 1981-present, especially in weekly rehearsals and many concerts Tom Hall, Steve Adams, and Cercie Miller around 1981-4. The solos over specified accompaniment textures were something we regularly performed.

Many of the ideas we worked on had roots in the work of Sun Ra, Don Cherry, and members of the AACM and BAG, some of whom I had worked with as a student at the Creative Music Studio. Improvisation and musicianship classes and ensemble rehearsals I participated in at CMS in the summers of 1978 and '79 with Karl Berger, Garrett List, Ingrid Sertso, Roscoe Mitchell, Jerome Cooper, Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, Leo Smith, Julius Hemphill, and Eugene Chadbourne influenced many of my own musical ideas and suggested many ways of teaching and structuring improvisation.

Tom Hall brought experience and structures from his other collective improvisation band, Ensemble Garuda (with Samm Bennett and Frank London) to YNSQ. For more on his ideas, see Tom Hall’s book *Free Improvisation: A Practical Guide* and his website, <http://www.freeimprovisation.com>.

Other sources of the ideas that were at play as we experimented with structures and sounds in improvisation were: traditional music recordings from all over the world (the Forest texture began as a response to certain aspects of some Mbuti music from Central Africa); new music composition and experimental music by European and American composers; European and Downtown NY new improvised music; and our exposure to and involvement in improvised dance, theater, comedy, performance art, and many other kinds of music from post-punk/No Wave to Caribbean dance music, West African drumming, singing and dance classes, rock, funk, wedding bands, and all kinds of jazz.

The notation with boxes containing text, connected by lines and read from left to right, is common in graphic scores and flow charts, but is more directly borrowed from Roscoe Mitchell’s concert-long suite that we performed with him at the Creative Music Studio in June 1978.

“Narma” is a name that YNSQ came up with, based on “Naima” and the postcard, “What is Nar?”: <http://www.holdthemustard.com/RESOURCES/PhotoCards5/Nar.html>
The names for the other textures (Grove, Clouds, Stars, Space, Storm) evolved from discussions with my 1995-96 New England Conservatory ensemble. I’m not attached to the names; feel free to change them!