Étude No. 4

Reimagine the Sound

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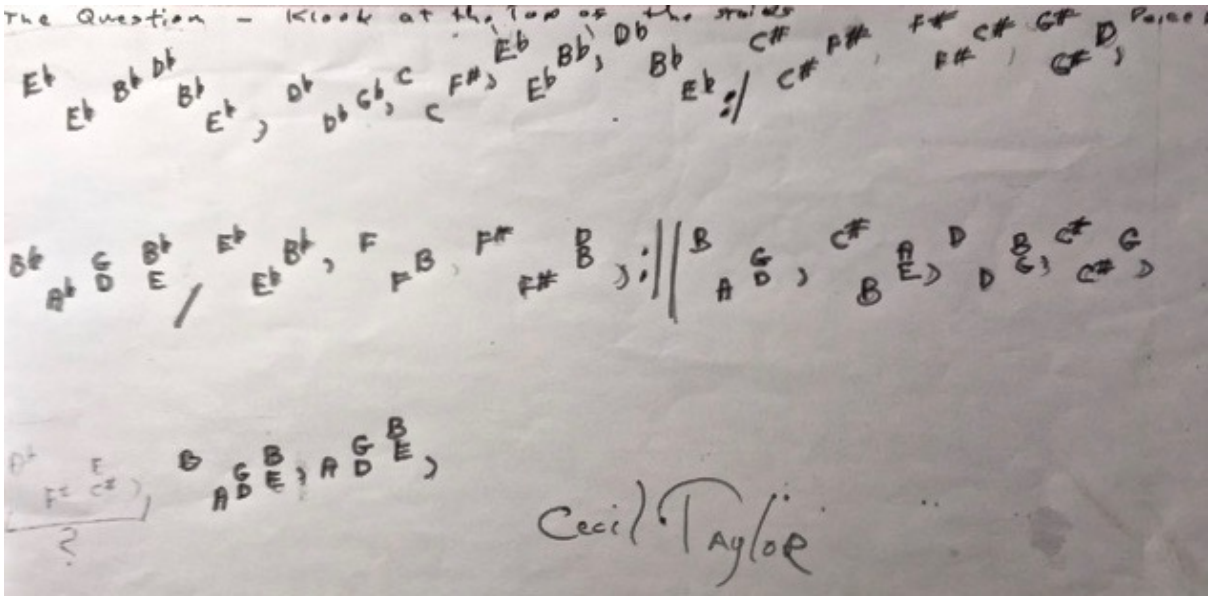
This étude was inspired by my work transcribing and analyzing the music of Cecil Taylor, specifically an untitled improvisation from the 1981 documentary *Imagine the Sound*. Taylor's notational style is highly unconventional, befitting his contention that "Western notation blocks total absorption in the 'action' playing."* He organizes his music into groups of repeated cells, which he represents as note names grouped in space along x and y axes of time and register.



Example of Cecil Taylor's notational method (courtesy Karen Borca)

My reimagining of Taylor's improvisation follows his same cell-based formal principles, and uses a similar method of notation. Much of the melodic material is also adapted from the *Imagine the Sound* improvisation. While a guide to notation is provided on the following page, that will not be enough to get a feel for the piece. Instead, find videos of CT performing and study them. Listen for his sense of phrasing, repetition, pacing, large-scale structure. But most importantly, simply watch him *move*.

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* Cecil Taylor, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," liner notes to *Unit Structures*, Cecil Taylor, BST 84237, LP, 1966.

Guide to Notation

"Reimagine the Sound" is divided into six sections, labeled A–F. Within each section, cells are delineated by whitespace. You may start each section with any cell in the section (not necessarily the top-left-most), and from there you may jump to (or return to) any other cell within the section ad lib. The exception to this is in section B, where cells must be read left-to-right and top-to-bottom.

Melodic material may be written as note names, scale degrees, or pitch class numbers. (Scale degrees are represented as Arabic numerals with ^s, and pitch class numbers are represented Arabic numerals without ^s and with T and E replacing 10 and 11.*) Relative height corresponds to relative register. Always read left-to-right, unless the cell lies above a double-sided arrow "⟷", in which case you may also read right-to-left. Rhythms are free unless otherwise specified.

"T" means transposition: e.g., T_7 = transpose up a perfect fifth (7 semitones); T_{-16} = transpose down a major tenth (16 semitones). "I" means inversion: e.g., I_{D4} = invert around the note D4;† $I_{E4/F4}$ = invert around the E4/F4 axis.

The "CT-esque" cluster runs mentioned in section C refer to Taylor's extremely fast cluster passages. These are performed by playing dyads or trichords with each hand, with the left hand playing only black keys and the right hand playing only white keys.‡

The "CT-esque" bassline mentioned in section E refers to a common technique used in Taylor's ballads, such as "After All" from *Silent Tongues* or "Pemmican" from *Garden*.§

This étude frequently references "Dasian"-based and "Guidonian"-based scales. For more information on how these non-octavian scales are constructed, see **Warmup No. 1**. Similarly, the bottom-right-most cell in section F ("free improvisation w/ hands separated at P5 or M10") explicitly harkens back to the hand separation intervals featured within that warmup.

Section D is actually identical to **Warmup No. 2**, just represented in a more abstract way.

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* I deploy "scale degrees" somewhat loosely in the score below, as I sometimes deploy the so-called "scale degrees" 9, 11, and 13 instead of 2, 4, and 6. That said, this is customary in jazz when emphasizing third relations.

† Here, as throughout this document, I am using Scientific Pitch Notation, where middle C = C4.

‡ For more information on how to perform these, see Mark Micchelli, "Sound Structures and Naked Fire Gestures in Cecil Taylor's Solo Piano Music," *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 3 (September 2022), https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.22.28.3/mto.22.28.3.micchelli.html.

§ For more on this technique, see Mark J. Bobak, "The Music of Cecil Taylor: An Analysis of Selected Piano Solos 1973–89" (DMA diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1994), 147–166 and Kaja Draksler, "Cecil Taylor: *Life As…*: Structure within a free improvisation" (Master's thesis, Conservatorium van Amsterdam, 2013), http://www.kajadraksler.com/Taylor.pdf.

Étude No. 4

Reimagine the Sound

Duration: probably at least 4m

Mark Micchelli

the form of this improvisation is **A** **B** **C** **D** **E** (**A**)

optional

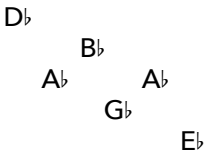
can be switched

can be switched

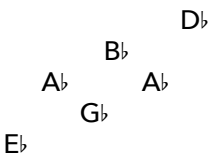
material from **F** may appear at any point

A

(RH)

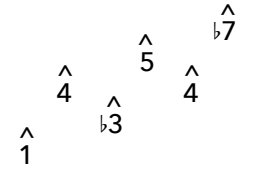


(LH)

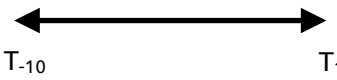


(prime or retrograde)

(RH)

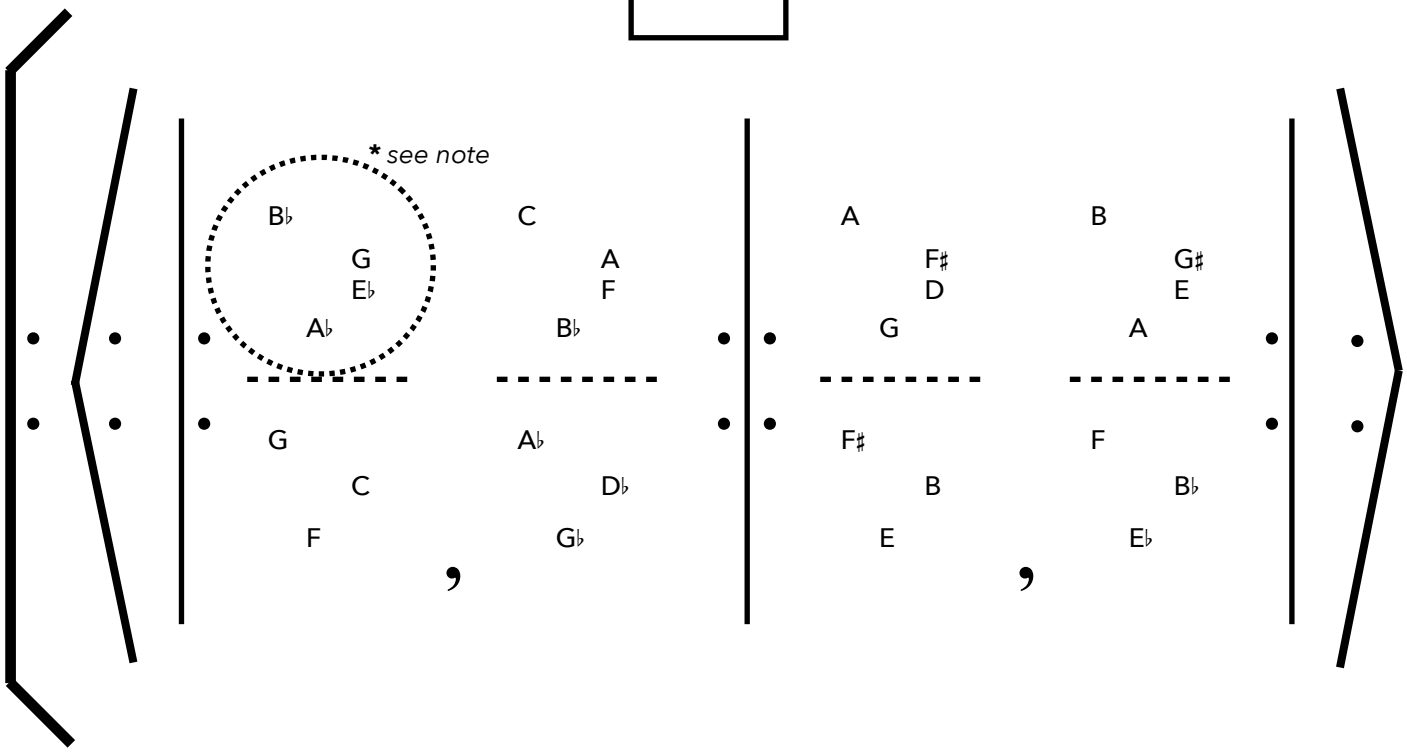


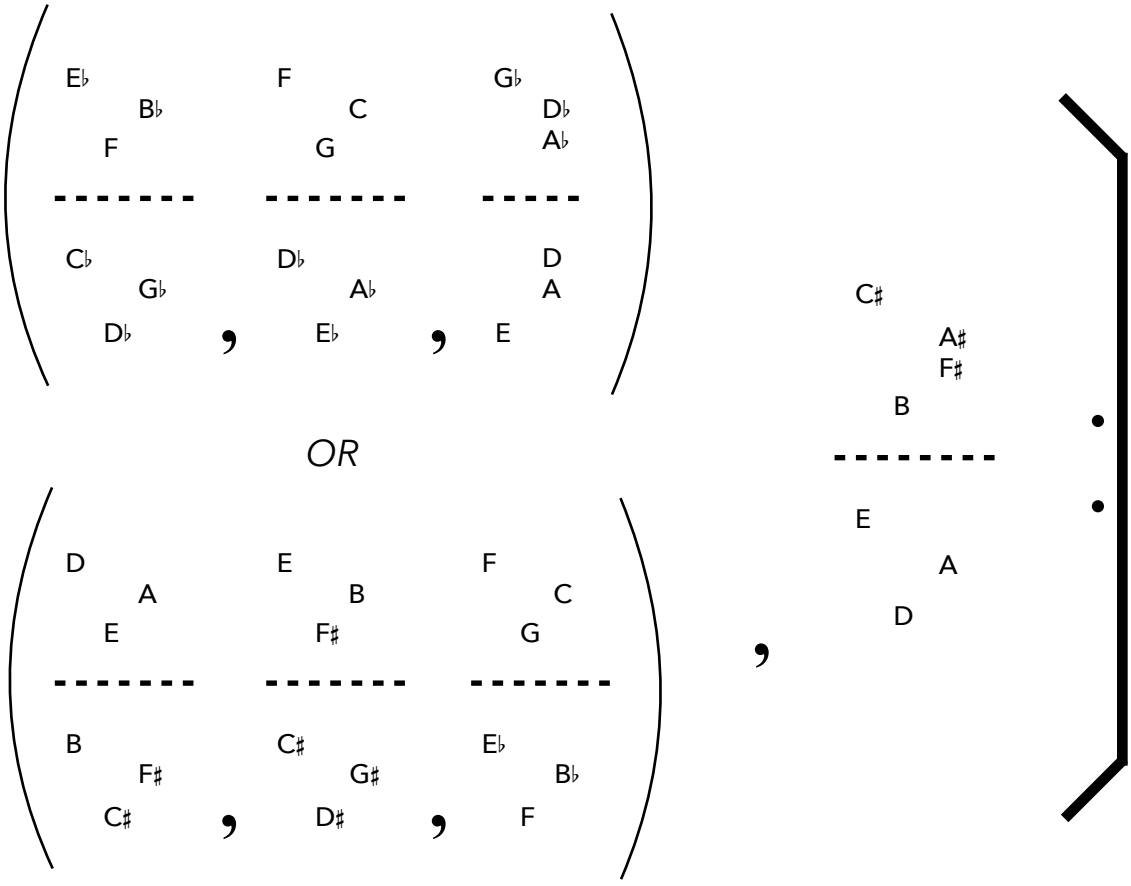
(LH) I_{D4} *OR* T_{-16}



symmetrical free improvisation around I_{D4}

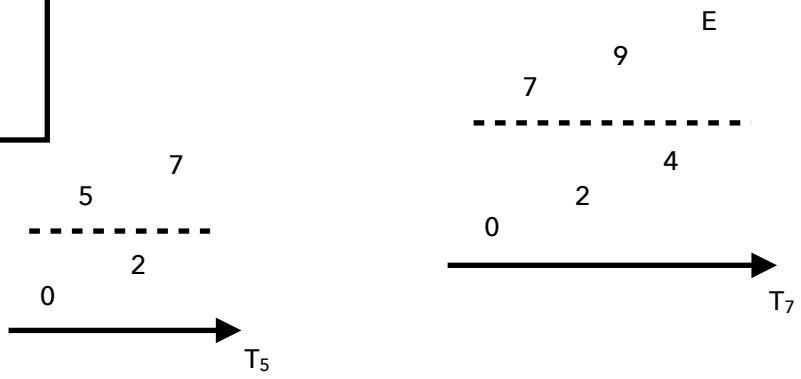
B



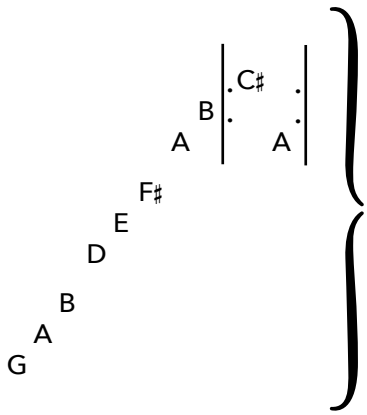


* note: any RH pattern of $\overset{\wedge}{9}\ \overset{\wedge}{7}\ \overset{\wedge}{5}\ \overset{\wedge}{1}$ can be inverted to $\overset{\wedge}{7}\ \overset{\wedge}{5}\ \overset{\wedge}{2}\ \overset{\wedge}{1}$

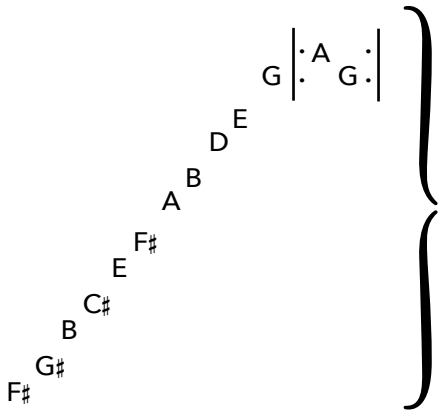
C



free improvisation using CT-esque alternating RH-white-key/LH-black-key cluster runs

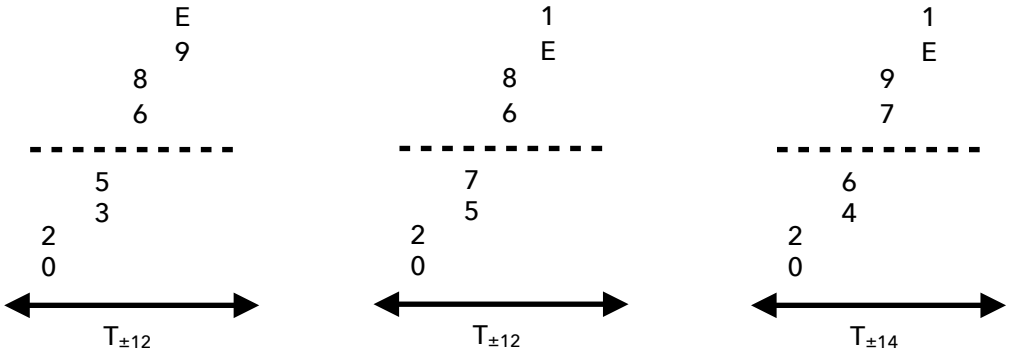


can keep moving up W-W-m3 interval cycle ("Dasian Pentatonic")

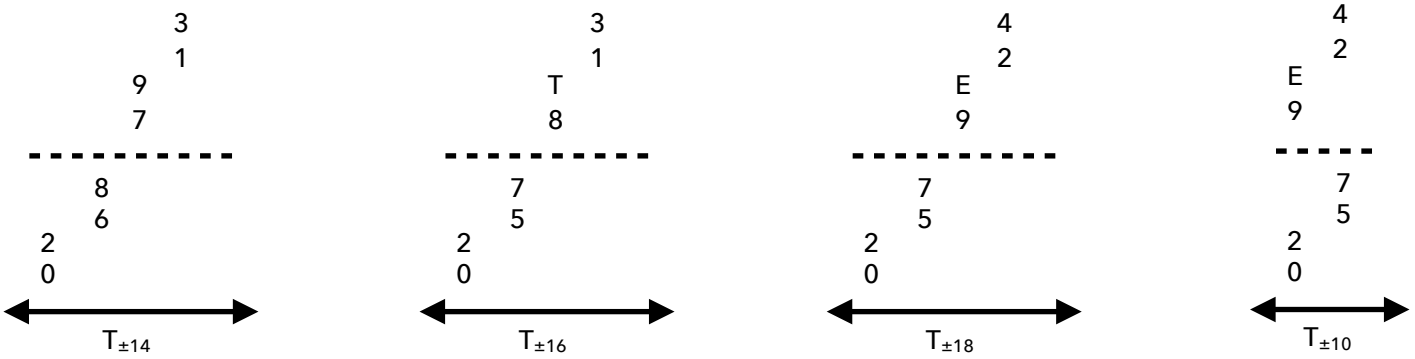


can keep moving up W-m3 interval cycle ("Guidonian Pentatonic")

D



free improvisation using (0235), (0264), (0257), and (0268) tetrachords



E

D♯ B♯ G♯ C♯ } $T_{\pm6}$

B♭ G E♭ A♭ } $T_{\pm3}$

F♯ E D♯ C♯ } $T_{\pm4}$

C B♭ G F } $T_{\pm4}$

Optional: intersperse CT-esque chromatic bassline in 8ves; make generous use of sostenuto pedal

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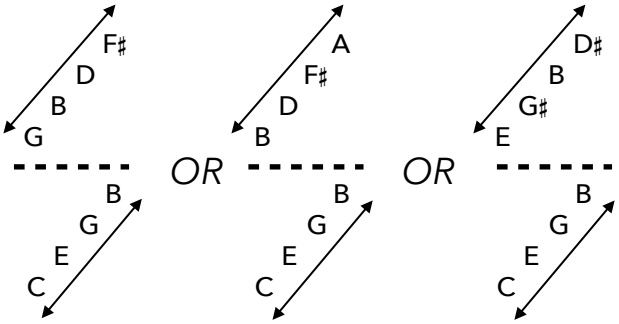
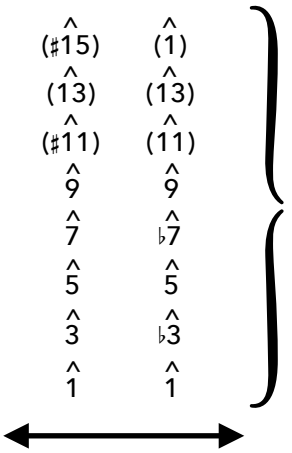
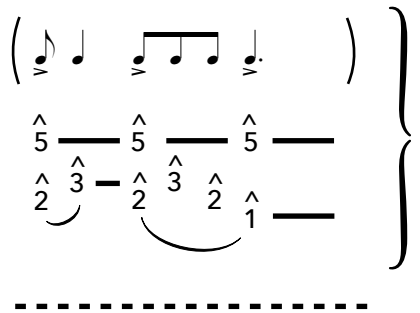
F

Dasian scale in 3rds w/ hands separated at the Dasian 5th, 7th, or 10th, e.g.:





T_1 when prime →, T_{-1} when ← ret., $T_{Dasian3rd}$ at any point (i.e. move up a M3 or m3 as to stay within the same Dasian harmony)



can also invert around ♭3̂/♯3̂ axis

T_{-7} *OR* T_{-9} *OR* T_{-16}

$T_{\pm3}$ *OR* $T_{\pm4}$

free improvisation w/ hands separated at the P5 or M10