

Jazz Transcription for Strings: Unlock the lessons in your record library!

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Why transcription?

When I first became interested in learning jazz, I set about asking the jazz musicians I knew what I should do. “Listen,” they all told me. “Just listen. It’s all there in the records.” But obviously ‘just listening’ wasn’t enough. “So, transcribe,” they added.

I dutifully set about notating Miles Davis’ solo on “So What”, but the sheets of neat, Juilliard-trained, hand-written manuscript I quickly produced left me no better equipped to improvise on the tune. Some years – and many questions – later I was able to gather a systematic approach to imitating, understanding and mastering the language of jazz. This approach to transcription is the key to all the lessons in the jazz library.

When we talk about “transcription” we usually think about the act of notating an improvised solo. I’d like to challenge you to think about transcription in a different way. In the method I will outline here, notation will be one of the last things you do with a solo. Before you set pen to manuscript paper, you’ll be memorizing, singing and finally playing the solo on your instrument.

Learning to construct swinging eighth note lines with good voice leading over changes takes discipline and persistence. Transcription, done thoroughly, rewards the student with a full toolkit to approach any kind of improvised music performance. As the great saxophonist David Liebman advocates, “Playing bebop necessitates instrumental technique, theoretical knowledge, a good fluent rhythmic feel and training of the ear. It is the calisthenics of jazz improvisation no matter what idiom.”¹

One of the best things about transcription is that it is always available. You can get started immediately. No teacher is required and very little equipment is needed. At first, you won’t even need an instrument! Jazz musicians at all levels – from beginners to professionals – can use transcription to learn vocabulary, develop new concepts and strengthen specific areas of their performance. It provides the beginning player with a tremendous sense of confidence and accomplishment. It places the student in the company of a vast international community of musicians who have all learned by emulating the performers who have captivated them. If you

¹ David Liebman. *Self-portrait of a jazz artist*, 2nd Ed. Rottenburg: Advance, 1996: 118.

follow this process through to the end, you can't help but absorb greatness into your own playing.

Think of jazz as a musical language with unique vocabulary, grammar and accents. Learning a great jazz solo by heart is the quickest and most complete manner of getting to the core of the musical language. It's a vivid and personal practice that lets you into the world of great jazz musicians in a way that no other form of practice can. Learning a great musician's solo by heart allows us to inhabit a musician's musical mind and body. Transcription is not simply a means of deep listening, but also an intimate experience of greatness. You can draw on these physical and emotional memories time and again in your own playing. This is as close as most of us can get to the oral tradition of music.

What transcription teaches us

There are three main things that you'll absorb in this process: time feel, voice leading and vocabulary.

Of these, the most important is rhythmic information. The main thing that makes a great musicians sound so good is their **time feel**: the manner in which they make their phrases sit in time. By learning to copy this precisely, you provide yourself with a kinesthetic understanding – a physical memory as well as an aural memory – of the given soloists' time feel. This is the single most important area for all jazz musicians, and especially string players new to the jazz idiom.

Secondly, if you follow this process you'll obtain a deep understanding of the soloist's approach to **voice leading** – the construction of melodic lines that suit the harmonic changes. The great jazz musicians² are masters at voice leading through chord changes. Imitating a great musician's characteristic approach to resolving melody and harmony is the classic – and still the best – method of learning good jazz lines.

Thirdly, a great solo is a rich mine of melodic, rhythmic, and other **vocabulary**. In the last phase of the transcription process I describe here, you'll learn how to identify and lift a great musician's characteristic melodic patterns, like II-V patterns, and use them in your own playing.

Why transcription is important for string players

Transcription is essential for all jazz instrumentalists, and especially important for string players. The language of jazz that we have inherited was built on horns, pianos, drums and basses. The greatest musicians in jazz – the innovators in swing and bebop who influenced all others to follow – were not string players. But string players, naturally seeking examples on their own instruments, tend to copy other string players. As a result, string players frequently aren't playing from the same page as other instrumentalists. A crucial step to achieving parity for string players in jazz is to be responsible for the same materials as all other jazz instruments. Transcription is the best means of going about this.

² Leaving out jazz drummers, who have their own concerns.

Why writing it out won't work

Done properly, the transcription process takes a long time. You might be tempted to write the solo out just to 'help things along a little'. Don't do this! Repetition is a far more efficient path to memorization than the written note. When you learn music from the page, you play with your eyes rather than your ears. And especially in jazz, what's written on the page is only a small fraction of what's really happening musically. Nuances of phrasing, timing, intonation, interaction, and most importantly, the entire emotional content of the music, are all missing on the printed page.

By memorizing every aspect of the solo, the musical information will begin to seep into your own playing. If you play from the written page, not only will you miss much of the really important information, you'll have cheated yourself out of the vital process of discovering and learning this information for yourself.

Written transcriptions, like those available in books or on the Internet, are therefore of limited use in learning to play jazz. You'd no sooner be able to play like Charlie Parker reading from a book of his transcribed solos than you could speak German sounding out *Der Spiegel*. The time to write out your solo is later on, in the analysis phase of the transcription process. For now, let's focus on learning the music!

How to Transcribe

Who to transcribe

Look to primary sources for your transcription. Primary sources are the players who have been crucial in shaping and defining jazz language – in particular the jazz eighth note language of swing and bebop – and who have influenced other major players in turn. Primary sources include John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Hank Mobley, Dexter Gordon, Bill Evans and many others. Secondary sources – players like Pat Metheny, Keith Jarrett and Randy Brecker – will be there for you later on, when you want to get at specific aspects of their playing. But your foundational work should always be rooted in the players who built the language.

Who you transcribe should be determined by their position with respect to creating and defining the jazz language, and not by their instrument. This means that string players should not necessarily transcribe string players! Stephane Grapelli, Stuff Smith and Svend Admussen are secondary sources. If you want to learn what they have to say on the instrument, it's perfectly fine to transcribe them later on, but a crucial step to strings achieving parity with other jazz instruments is for string students to learn the same vocabulary, to the same standard, as any other instrumentalist. That means starting with the players – mainly horn players – who built the jazz language.

Don't feel obliged to select a solo based on range. It's a simple matter – and great ear training – to jump up or down an octave as needed. Violinists can transcribe alto sax and trumpet solos without changing octave. The viola's range matches the tenor sax's range perfectly but can easily cover the alto sax, and cellists can learn tenor sax solos in the original octave or the octave below. String players, and especially cellists, should also transcribe bass players to learn about constructing bass lines.

What to transcribe

It's important choose a solo that isn't too difficult, both in terms of instrumental/technical difficulty, and the amount of information to learn. The following solos have been selected because they're relatively brief, medium tempo solos that are packed full of great musical content. All of these solos sit well on stringed instruments. Importantly, all are currently available in records stores or online (see Appendix A: Recordings). Wherever possible, buy the record so that you can hear the music in context.

Choose your solo carefully. Less technically advanced instrumentalists should choose solos with slower tempi and fewer notes. As you advance in jazz, you can choose solos to address targeted areas of your playing. Whichever solo you choose, be sure it's one you love – you're going to be spending a lot of time with it!

Here are a handful of great solos to start with:

Artist	Song	Album³	Instrument
Chet Baker	“Let's Get Lost”	<i>Chet Baker Sings and Plays</i>	Trumpet
John Coltrane	“My Shining Hour”	<i>Coltrane Jazz</i>	Tenor
Miles Davis	“Surrey With The Fringe On Top”	<i>Steamin' with the Miles Davis Quintet</i>	Trumpet
Miles Davis	“Freddie Freeloader”	<i>Kind of Blue</i>	Trumpet
Dexter Gordon	“Second Balcony Jump”	<i>Go</i>	Tenor
Hank Mobley	“Hank's Other Soul”	<i>Another Workout</i>	Tenor
Charlie Parker	“K C Blues”	<i>The Essential Charlie Parker</i>	Alto
Lester Young	“Blue Lester”	<i>Jazz Masters: Lester Young</i>	Tenor
Lester Young	“Lady Be Good”	<i>Definitive Lester Young: Ken Burns Jazz</i>	Tenor
Lester Young	“Lester Leaps In”	<i>Definitive Lester Young: Ken Burns Jazz</i>	Tenor
Lester Young	“Body And Soul”	<i>The Complete Alladin Recordings of Lester Young</i>	Tenor
Paul Chambers	“Good Bait”	<i>John Coltrane: Jazz Showcase</i>	Bass
Paul Chambers	“The Theme”	<i>Original Jazz Classics: The New Miles Davis Quintet</i>	Bass

³ In most cases I have listed the most recently released re-issue, and not necessarily the original recording. For more details see “Appendix A: Recordings”.

Preparing the music

Once you've chosen a solo to transcribe, take a little time to prepare your materials. We now have access to inexpensive transcribing software for Mac and PC that will slow down the tempo of the music without altering the pitch. The most commonly used programs are Transcribe! (Seventh String, <<http://www.seventhstring.com>>, £25) and the Amazing Slow Downer (Roni Music <<http://www.ronimusic.com>>, \$44.95). Transcribing software allows you to do a number of useful things. You can slow down the tempo of the music without altering the pitch. You can also loop specific sections for practice.

If you don't have regular access to a computer for your practice, make a CD or cassette copy of the solo. Edit the song to excerpt the solo. If your CD player doesn't have a "repeat" function, or if you're using a cassette, make one CD or cassette with the solo repeated as many times as will fit so that you won't have to keep rewinding after every listen.

Tools you'll need

- Tape player, CD player, MP3 player or computer
- Speakers and/or headphones
- Optional, but really useful software: Transcribe! 6.0 (Seventh String) or Amazing Slow Downer (Roni Music)
- The CD, tape or digital file of the solo you're going to learn

Step One: Singing the Solo

The first step in transcribing is to learn to sing the solo.

You might also find it helpful to learn it phrase by phrase at first. Don't worry about not getting all the notes at first, just proceed slowly, and surely, and getting as much as you can. Note where the phrases start and stop with respect to the beat and barline. Learn the shapes of phrases, and fill in the notes as you go. Listen carefully and sing along with as much as you can. You can also set the selection to repeat on your computer, stereo, or MP3 player and work on this as you do other things. You can be working on your transcription while you drive, walk, or wash the dishes!

Take your time, and aim for total accuracy. Match the soloist not just note for note, but also in slides, ghost notes, vibrato, attack, sustain, rhythm and every other audible quality. Listen carefully for fine detail: know the exact length of notes and rests (is that a triplet rest or a sixteenth?) and the precise quality of pitches (Is that a half tone or a quarter tone? Is the note B or a B flat or something in between?) Before you think of picking up your instrument, you should be capable of singing the solo in time, in tune, accurately with or without the recording.

Test yourself to see if you're ready to move on. As you sing along with the solo, ask someone else to turn the volume completely down at random intervals while you keep singing. If you and the recorded soloist are consistently in the same place when the volume comes back up, then you've really memorized the solo and you're ready for the next step.

Step Two: Learning the solo on your instrument

String players will almost always transcribe non-stringed instruments. This means we face some interesting technical challenges. Figuring out the technical details that will allow you to accurately reproduce a solo played on the saxophone or the trumpet is a valuable part of the transcription process. The transcription becomes an etude in jazz string playing, and taking full advantage of this will allow you to develop new solutions and become a stronger player for both jazz and other styles of performance.

Just as you did in singing the solo, strive for absolute accuracy on the instrument. Your playing should be indistinguishable, in terms of time, pitch and nuance, from the original.

Since you'll have already memorized the solo, you can work away from the recording as well as with the recording. Take individual sections and work on them away from the recording, then refer back to the recording to check for accuracy. Using a metronome or the transcription software, build up speed from 50% (or slower, if need be) to 100% of the original tempo. Approach this task in the same way you'd approach classical repertoire: remember that fast playing comes not from speed itself but accuracy, and that accuracy can only be obtained by mastery at slower speeds.

Bowings and fingerings

You will need to spend time determining the best fingerings and bowings for each passage. Since many of the melodic patterns you'll encounter will be unique to the jazz idiom, you'll need to employ different technical approaches to bowing and fingering. There are three main things to think of here: (1) chromatic fingerings, (2) quick shifts between half, 1st, 2nd and 3rd position, and (3) bowings.

Chromatic fingerings are necessary where the soloist uses more than two successive chromatic notes (each a semitone apart). In order to match the articulation of a horn player or piano player, string players need to strive to use a separate finger for each note, rather than using one finger to play two notes. When you play each note with a separate finger, you are able to make a more clear distinction at the start of each note, which more closely emulates the articulation of the soloist. Quick shifts between half, 1st, 2nd and 3rd positions – sometimes for nothing longer than a note – are often necessary to facilitate one-finger-per-note chromatic fingerings.

For example, let's look at the following passages from Sonny Rollins' solo on "Just In Time" with my suggested fingerings:



Despite what I wrote earlier about writing being no use to learning the music, this process does result in new understandings. When you write out the solo you are required to describe the music in unambiguous rhythmic and melodic terms, and engage with the music on an intellectual level. In the process, you will discover new levels of information: patterns emerge, such as little musical signatures of the performer, themes that are stated and developed during the solo, and so forth.

Analysis and vocabulary building

All jazz musicians have characteristic phrases that they use over and over. This personal vocabulary becomes the glue that holds solos together. This vocabulary is central to the jazz dialect of bebop or changes playing: the bigger your vocabulary, the easier it is to solo comfortably and convincingly in the idiom.

Isolate the phrases from the solo that appeal to you. Take the first of these phrases and examine its harmonic logic against the changes. For example, if the progression is a II-V progression, how did the soloist negotiate the progression in terms of voice leading, and where the leading tones sit rhythmically?

Now learn the phrase in all 12 keys.⁴ I've included an example of the first four keys below, just to show you how to get started, but it's really best to learn this by ear rather by notation. Try to think of the degrees (numbers) of the scale rather than individual letter names.

⁴ In jazz practice, "all 12 keys" is shorthand for learning to play a phrase successively over each of the keys in the cycle of fifths. In classical music theory, the cycle of fifths ascends in fifths, but in jazz practice it moves upwards in 4ths, to better represent the II-V progression that is the foundation of the repertoire. The progression is thus C – F- Bb – Eb – Ab – Db – Gb – B – E – A – D – G. A playalong such as Jamey Aebersold's ii-V7-I series is a great tool for learning phrases in all 12 keys.

ii- V7 - I in Bb C-9 F7 B \flat

ii- V7 - I in Eb F-9 B \flat 7 E \flat

ii- V7 - I in Ab B \flat -9 E \flat 7 A \flat

ii- V7 - I in Db E \flat -9 A \flat 7 D \flat

Once you've done that, pick a standard tune other than the one you've been transcribing. It can be anything II-V based. Ideally, you should have a playalong recording for the tune. Go through the lead sheet and mark off all the II-V progressions. Now improvise over the tune, inserting the phrase from your transcription in each II-V progression.

Here is Sonny Rollins' ii-V7-I pattern from "Just in Time" inserted into the first eight measures of "Autumn Leaves":

ii- V7 - I in G

A-9 D7 G CMaj7

Minor ii-V7-i in Emin

F \sharp min7(b5) B7 Emin

Go through the rest of the tune in this fashion, systematically applying all the phrases you earmarked from your transcription.

Making the vocabulary your own

An important step in transcription involves extending the vocabulary to personalize it. You're taking what you've learned, and now are making it your own.

Choose one particularly well-crafted phrase from the solo you've transcribed, and practice playing variations on it. Sonny Rollins uses virtually the same phrase at the same place (measures 24 and 25 of the 32 bar form) in each of the two choruses of his solo on "Just In Time". In the second chorus, he inserts several ghost notes and makes minor alterations to the pitch sequence, but the rhythm and the melodic content are virtually identical in both versions, displaying amazing internal consistency:

Ms. 57-59: ii- V7 - I in Bb

C-9 F7 B \flat

Ms. 89-91: ii- V7 - I in Bb

C-9 F7 B \flat

You can vary the phrase rhythmically by using standard compositional techniques such as augmentation, diminution, or displacement, or changing eighth notes to triplets, as in the examples below:

Rhythmic displacement

Changing eighth notes to triplets

You can also vary the melodic content by changing the pitch sequence, substituting pitches, and changing the direction of the melodic line. You may stick to the rhythmic form (as Rollins did in the examples above), or you can vary melodic and rhythmic content as in the examples below:

The image displays four staves of musical notation in G-flat major (two flats) and 8/8 time. Each staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats, and a common time signature of 8. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth, quarter, and half notes, as well as rests and accidentals. The first staff shows a melodic line with a mix of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff features a similar melodic line with some eighth-note runs. The third staff continues the melodic development with more eighth-note patterns. The fourth staff concludes the line with a final melodic phrase and a double bar line.

Write out 10 variations of the line you've chosen. Now, while soloing with a rhythm section or a playalong, insert these variations every time you have a II-V. Repeat this entire process with all the phrases you liked from the transcription. Done properly, this will take quite a while, but it is the most valuable jazz practice!

There are hardly any limits to the things you can do in working with your transcribed solo. For example, you could write a chorus of a solo in the style of your transcription. Play the transcribed solo, then your written solo in the style of the transcription, then improvise based on the two. Quote the transcription when you're improvising with a rhythm section, and see where there rhythm section's response leads you.

Conclusion

Assuming you've done all or most of the process described above, you'll know this solo and its parent language very well: physically, intellectually, aurally and emotionally. You'll have worked the ideas out with a swinging rhythm section, helping you cement the rhythmic phrasing and voice leading lessons you've learned during your transcription. All of this leads to a real understanding of the jazz language. Even three or four solos done in this thorough fashion are worth years of the more "academic" forms of jazz study that are becoming more prevalent in jazz education today.

Appendix A: Recordings

Chet Baker “Let’s Get Lost”

Apple iTunes

Chet Baker *Prince of Cool: The Pacific Jazz Years 1952-1957* (2004, EMI)

Chet Baker *Chet Baker Sings and Plays* (2004, Pacific)

John Coltrane “My Shining Hour”

John Coltrane: *Coltrane Jazz* (1961/2000, Atlantic/Rhino)

Miles Davis “Surrey With The Fringe On Top”

Apple iTunes

Miles Davis: *Steamin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet* (1056/1989 Prestige)

Miles Davis “Freddie Freeloader”

Apple iTunes

Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue* (1957, Sony)

Dexter Gordon “Second Balcony Jump”

Dexter Gordon: *Go* (1962/1999, Blue Note)

Hank Mobley “Hank’s Other Soul”

Hank Mobley: *Another Workout* (1961/1985)

Charlie Parker “K C Blues”

Apple iTunes

Charlie Parker: *The Essential Charlie Parker* (1992, Verve)

Charlie Parker: *20th Century Masters – the Millennium Collection: The Best of Charlie Parker 2004* (Hip-O/Verve)

Lester Young “Blue Lester”

Apple iTunes

Lester Young: *Jazz Masters: Lester Young* (2004, Digital Masterworks International)

Lester Young “Lady Be Good”

Lester Young “Lester Leaps In”

Lester Young: *Definitive Lester Young: Ken Burns Jazz* (2000, Verve)

Lester Young “Body And Soul”

Apple iTunes

The Complete Alladin Recordings of Lester Young (1994, Blue Note)

Paul Chambers “Good Bait”

Apple iTunes

John Coltrane: *Jazz Showcase* (1998, Fantasy)

Paul Chambers “The Theme”

Apple iTunes

Miles Davis: *Original Jazz Classics: The New Miles Davis Quintet* (1955/1989, Prestige)

Resources

Transcription Software

Transcribe! Seventh String, <<http://www.seventhstring.com>> £25.

The Amazing Slow Downer, Roni Music <<http://www.ronimusic.com>> \$44.95.

Playalongs

Jamey Aebersold, THE ii/V7/I PROGRESSION, Volume 3,
<<http://www.jazzbooks.com>>, \$14.95.

Recommended References

David Liebman, "Self-portrait of a Jazz Artist", 2nd Ed. Rottenburg: Advance Music, 1996.

David Liebman, "The Improviser's Guide to Transcription" VHS, Caris Music
<<http://upbeat.com/caris>> \$49.95.

Jazz Transcription for Strings: Unlock the lessons in your record library!

Want to know more?

The material this clinic and handout will be included – along with much more content – in a forthcoming book titled “Contemporary Improvised Music for Strings”. If you would like to be notified of the release of this book, please fill out the form below with your contact information and I will add you to my mailing list.

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Please keep me informed about:

- The book “Contemporary Improvised Music for Strings”**
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