The Rule of Threes

Three is not only a prime number—it's the primo number. For improvised music, a three-way is pretty ideal. Triangulation has been a staple of jazz for years—think piano trio and the great threesomes of Sonny Rollins. It's a legacy of greatness that perseveres in free improvisation. I recommend seeking out lots of trios.

Why do trios work so well? Let's go step-by-step up the lineup ladder and assess:

1. Solo
Doubts can be raised about whether improvisation is even possible for a lone player. Is interaction an
absolute necessity? Is playing alone actually a kind of composed music rather than improvisation? Solo playing can be fascinating, rich, quite complete in itself. It's inherently demonstrative—it's about showing what you can do—and can function like a lecture or a lesson, which is cool, for sure. John Zorn's stupendous 1980s solo music for saxophone, with its instantaneous shifts in timbre and volume and its startling nonlinear sense of unfolding, is a case in point. But you don't get the pleasure of hearing people working out the sounds together, which for me is half the fun.

One way to think about free solos as being genuinely improvised is to imagine that the kind of interaction one looks for between players is instead confined to the relationship between the soloist and the instrument or the performance context or the audience. Those contingencies can have a negotiated aspect just as provisional and unplanned as the kind we expect to find in the negotiations between different players in an ensemble.
2. Duet

Some of the finest improvisations ever played have been in this format. That said, there’s an inherent obviousness about how things work, simply because there are two voices squaring off. Ping-Pong is a common metaphor: an idea is batted back and forth. It doesn’t have to be like that, duos can be more oblique, but as a class they are burdened with dialogue’s procedural tendency toward linear development and have to struggle to overcome that tilt.

3. Trio

Take the duet and add an X factor. Figuring out how the flow of ideas and sounds works in a trio is often difficult, but in the best hands it can be sublime communication. The third player adds exponentially to the possibilities, breaking up the linear flow and contributing layers of complexity. Duets are addition; trios are trigonometry. All three players can work together. Each player can work independently. Two can work together and the third can bugger off. Any of these proclivities
can change multiple times over the course of an improvement. It's much less polar, less dualistic. Another positive aspect: the trio has an approachable level of complexity. There's always some circling back and digging in. Rather than being factional, with players choosing sides, it tends to promote a kind of intimacy and intensity.

4. Quartet
Again, there have been some sensational ones, many of them, and there will be in the future, no doubt. But when there are four players, it can easily become double duets or a trio with a guest soloist. Or it can just slip into more conventional instrumental roles. Something about this format is automatically less concentrated with the addition of just one more person. But it's still a number with massive possibility for complexity and interplay, thrilling when well done.

5. Quintet+
Here we start to understand the general dictum that larger improvising ensembles have to be
populated by really good improvisors. The main reason is that, unlike a duet or trio where everyone can easily hear everyone else, in a quintet it’s more difficult to pay attention to the overall music (sometimes one player can’t hear past another to grasp what a third one is doing!), and the results can be highly factional or segmented—two players here, three players here—with unsatisfactory or strained communication as an ensemble.* For top-notch players, this isn’t a problem, and quintets or sextets, not to mention a group like the Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet or the London Improvisers Orchestra, can be jaw-dropping. It’s like watching an Olympic diver: the degree of difficulty is so much higher that when it works, it’s worth lots more points.

*Trumpeter Tom Djll formed his group Grosse Abfahrt specifically to push the issue of ensemble size, assembling a larger ensemble of eight to ten players. “This range seems to settle in a locale where there is a strong opportunity for individual sound-agents to emerge and make a statement against the ensemble backdrop, and also for the entire ensemble to cohere into long-form structures that transcend the productions of conventional improvised music sociality.” From Djll’s liner notes to Grosse Abfahrt, Vanity (Emanem Records, 2009).