

SCSBOA Presentation

JAZZ

IMPROVISATION

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- **The Importance of *chord tones*, not *scales* – Hal Crook**

The chord-scale approach is based on the idea that if a chord is diatonic to a scale, then that scale can be used as a source to derive melody on that chord.

Using the chord-scale approach gives improvisers (especially less proficient ones) greater melodic and rhythmic mobility (i.e., they can improvise pitch sequences in eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth notes, etc.). Whereas chord tones must be played in leaps (minor third intervals or wider), a chord scale can be played in steps (major and minor second intervals), and consecutive steps are much easier to play fast and accurately than consecutive leaps. In general, less-experienced players are also familiar with scales and scale patterns than chord arpeggios from practicing technical exercises in method books and, therefore, prefer to use chord scales for improvising.

For beginner and intermediate-level players, the chord-scale approach has a potential downside. Many students begin studying chord scales early in their musical education and attempt to apply the knowledge acquired immediately on their instruments. Unfortunately, this often happens too soon in the student's development as an improviser--before he or she has learned how to shape an appealing improvised melody by ear on a chord or chord progression using only, or mainly, chord tones.

Chord scales can present too much information, or information that cannot be readily processed, controlled, and used musically by the novice improviser. It is much easier to understand chord-scale theory than it is to apply it with musical results in an improvised solo. Improvising on chords with chord scales means that a soloist can play melody notes that he or she does not recognize or cannot identify and control by ear. This can result in wandering, shapeless, directionless, or mechanical-sounding melody lines. Often the lines are played in eighth notes to the exclusion of all other rhythm values, producing undesirable melodic and rhythmic content. Such improvised melodies often tend to outline tonic quality on nontonic functioning chords and vice versa.

It is relevant to point out here that the pioneers of jazz improvisation relied on their listening/hearing skills and their ability to accurately outline basic chord sound to guide their improvising and to create inspired melodies. They did not rely on the mechanics of chord scales. Beginning improvisers should, therefore, first experience how good it sounds and how right it feels to play inside the chords using only the chord tones before experiencing the allure and sophistication of chord scales. Improvising melodies using only chord tones connects the soloist to the song's harmony, giving him or her a feeling of oneness with the music. This is essential before a player can hear how to use chord scales and nonharmonic approach notes effectively.

- **How to Practice chord tones – Jeff Ellwood**

Through over 20 years of teaching, I've worked with many students and programs trying to spread the word about this concept of focusing on the notes of the chord over the scale. In looking at pedagogical concepts in education, the use of common core practices are applied to many subjects, yet when it comes to improvisation, it's a free for all. In common core, students are required to show their work. As directors we need to start applying some common core standards related to improvisation.

Before the student can start improvising, the student needs to demonstrate some foundational concepts first. This will help them open their ears to truly hear the chords as opposed to solely reading them (improvising with their eyes)

- **Play the roots of the chord (in time) through the solo section.**

1 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

- **Play the 3rds of the chord (in time) through the solo section.**

2 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

- **Play the 5ths of the chord (in time) through the solo section.**

3 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

- Play the 7ths of the chord (in time) through the solo section.

4 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

If the student cannot do the exercises in real time, they should be required to go home and write it out. A student should do the same type of work that is required in their core education classes as opposed to “winging it.”

2 note combinations:

The 2nd level of this exercise is to play 2 notes per bar only using chord tones. The box below are all the possible 2 note chord tone combinations available.

2 note combinations

1-3	3-1	5-1	7-1
1-5	3-5	5-3	7-3
1-7	3-7	5-7	7-5

Here is an example using chord tones 3-5

5 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

Exercise 5 shows a four-measure progression of chords: Dmi⁷, G⁷, Cma⁷, and A⁷. The notation is in treble and bass clefs. The first measure (Dmi⁷) has notes D4, F#4, A4 in the treble and D3, F3, A3 in the bass. The second measure (G⁷) has G4, B4, D5 in the treble and G3, B3, D4 in the bass. The third measure (Cma⁷) has C5, E5, G5 in the treble and C4, E4, G4 in the bass. The fourth measure (A⁷) has A4, C#5, E5 in the treble and A3, C#4, E4 in the bass. A bracket on the left indicates measures 17-20.

Side note: notice that the octave can be adjusted using the same 3-5 combination.

6 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

Exercise 6 shows a four-measure progression of chords: Dmi⁷, G⁷, Cma⁷, and A⁷. The notation is in treble and bass clefs. The first measure (Dmi⁷) has notes D4, F#4, A4 in the treble and D3, F3, A3 in the bass. The second measure (G⁷) has G4, B4, D5 in the treble and G3, B3, D4 in the bass. The third measure (Cma⁷) has C5, E5, G5 in the treble and C4, E4, G4 in the bass. The fourth measure (A⁷) has A4, C#5, E5 in the treble and A3, C#4, E4 in the bass. A bracket on the left indicates measures 21-24.

Another exercise can be created by altering the pattern every other bar. 3-5 becomes 5-3 in alternating measures.

7 Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷ A⁷

Exercise 7 shows a four-measure progression of chords: Dmi⁷, G⁷, Cma⁷, and A⁷. The notation is in treble and bass clefs. The first measure (Dmi⁷) has notes D4, F#4, A4 in the treble and D3, F3, A3 in the bass. The second measure (G⁷) has G4, B4, D5 in the treble and G3, B3, D4 in the bass. The third measure (Cma⁷) has C5, E5, G5 in the treble and C4, E4, G4 in the bass. The fourth measure (A⁷) has A4, C#5, E5 in the treble and A3, C#4, E4 in the bass. A bracket on the left indicates measures 25-28.

Randomize the 2 note combinations:

Here are 2 choruses on the blues randomizing the 2 note combinations.

The student must first be able to write this down and apply it through the chord changes and perform it in real time so they can truly learn to hear the harmonic motion.

Next, the student should eventually improvise the random combinations in real time.

Notice that notes in the 2 note combinations can be moved around through octave displacement to create smoother note connections.

1

B^{b7} E^{b7} B^{b7} B^{b7}

152

E^{b7} E^{b7} B^{b7} G⁷(^{b9}/_{b13})

156

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^{b7} F⁷

160

2

B^{b7} E^{b7} B^{b7} B^{b7}

164

E^{b7} E^{b7} B^{b7} G⁷(^{b9}/_{b13})

168

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^{b7} F⁷ B^{b7}

172

Targeting Chord Tones: Approach Notes

In improvisation, it is important at the beginning and intermediate stages to get students to target chord tones beats 1 and 3 of the bar. (This is not a strict general rule. It's best to target both, but will be just as effective if only beat 1 or 3 is targeted at a minimum).

1



Scale motion down into target note

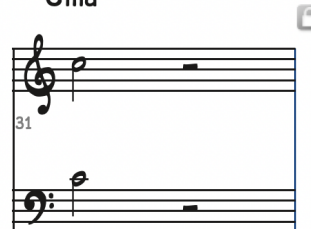
2

Scale notes above and below the target note



Cma⁷

Target Note



3

Scale notes below and above the target note



4



Scale motion up into target note

When approaching a target note. We use the notes from the chord scale we are approaching.



Chromatic Approaches (For more advanced students)

5



Chromatic notes above and below the target note

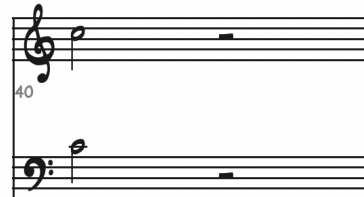
6



2 chromatic steps above the target note

Cma⁷

Target Note



7



2 chromatic steps below the target note

8



Chromatic notes below and above the target note



E^bma⁷

D⁷

Gma⁷

Additional Approaches

9



1/2 step from below, scale step from above

10



1/2 step from below
2 1/2 steps from above

11



1/2 step from above
2 1/2 steps from below

12



2 1/2 steps from above
1/2 step from below

13



Scale step from above, 1/2 step from below

Practicing Chord Changes

The students should now pick a chord tone to target (1-3-5-7) and pick one of the 13 Approach Note patterns and perform them in time during rehearsal with the rhythm section.

Targeting the 3rds with scale motion from above. *Remember: we use the notes of the scale that we are going to.*

Measures 90-94. Chords: B^b7, E^b7, B^b7, B^b7. The exercise shows scale motion targeting the 3rd of the next chord.

Measures 95-98. Chords: E^b7, E^b7, B^b7, G⁷(^b9|^b13). The exercise shows scale motion targeting the 3rd of the next chord.

Measures 99-102. Chords: Cmi⁷, F⁷, B^b7, F⁷. The exercise shows scale motion targeting the 3rd of the next chord.

These exercises can played where the target note is on the downbeat or played on the upbeat to approach the target

Measures 116-119. Chords: B^b7, E^b7, B^b7, B^b7. The exercise shows scale motion targeting the 3rd of the next chord.

The students should now pick a chord tone to target (1-3-5-7) and pick one of the 13 Approach Note patterns and perform them in time during rehearsal with the rhythm section.

Targeting the 7th with scale notes from above and below. *Remember: we use the notes of the scale that we are going to.*

103

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7

108

E^b7 E^b7 B^b7 G⁷(^b9(_b13)

112

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^b7 F⁷

These exercises can be played where the target note is on the downbeat or played on the upbeat to approach the target.

121

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7

Targeting the 7ths mixing up the approaches.

126

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7

131

E^b7 E^b7 B^b7 G⁷(^b9(_b13)

135

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^b7 F⁷

Detailed description: This musical score is in 4/4 time and features a sequence of chords: B^b7, E^b7, B^b7, B^b7, E^b7, E^b7, B^b7, G⁷(^b9(_b13), Cmi⁷, F⁷, B^b7, and F⁷. The melody is composed of eighth and quarter notes, often with ties, and includes various accidentals (flats, naturals, and sharps) to target the 7th of the current chord. The bass line consists of quarter and eighth notes, also with ties and accidentals. Measure numbers 126, 131, and 135 are indicated at the start of their respective systems.

Mixing up the target note and the approaches.

139

B^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7

144

E^b7 E^b7 B^b7 G⁷(^b9(_b13)

148

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^b7 F⁷

Detailed description: This musical score continues the sequence with chords: B^b7, E^b7, B^b7, B^b7, E^b7, E^b7, B^b7, G⁷(^b9(_b13), Cmi⁷, F⁷, B^b7, and F⁷. The melody and bass line show more varied rhythmic patterns, including eighth notes and quarter notes, with ties and accidentals used to target specific notes. Measure numbers 139, 144, and 148 are indicated at the start of their respective systems.

Sample lines taken from the bebop era that target chord tones with approach notes.

○ = Target Notes (chord tones) — = Approach Notes

69

E^b7 E^b7 B^b7 B^b7

73

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^bma⁷

76

Cmi⁷ F⁷ B^b7

79

C[#]mi⁷(^b5) F[#]7(^b9) Bmi⁷

177

Dmi⁷ G⁷ Cma⁷

180

Cma⁷

183

Gmi⁷ C⁷