Piano jazz improvisation techniques pdf

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Quick Tip Instructor Jonny May Skill Level Level 2 Level 3 Learning Focus Basslines Exercises Improvisation Scales Music Style Get free weekly lessons, practice tips, and downloadable resources to your inbox! Do you want to improvise jazz piano, but don't know where to start? In this lesson, I'm going to teach you how to play jazz piano improv with one simple chord progression, one scale, and 3 exercises to help you create amazing, beautiful jazz lines. Whether you are a beginner or experienced jazz pianist, these exercises will pay huge dividends as you develop your improvisation abilities. Jazz Piano Improv Step 1: Pick a Simple Chord Progression If you want to improvise jazz piano, the very first step is to pick a chord progression that is easy to improvise over. This is one of the first mistakes that I see beginner jazz piano students make. They try to improvise over a song with a lot of chords, like Satin Doll or Fly Me to the Moon. Don't make that mistake! If you want to improvise jazz piano, I recommend picking a chord progression that fits these three criteria: Why choose a progression that is only 4 chords? Because you want to free up your mental real estate to focus on your improvisation. Why do we use a chord progression that is commonly used in jazz standards and lead sheets? Because when we improvise piano, we are typically improvising in the context of a jazz standard, meaning we play the melody (the "Head"), then improvise a solo over the chords, and then return to the melody. Therefore, when you are practicing jazz improv, it is best to choose a progression that you will commonly see in a fake book because you will be more prepared to solo over those tunes. In other words, you want your improv exercises to be practical. So, what is the best progression to practice improvisation over? Well, there is a jazz progression that fits all of the above criteria, and I would argue that it is the most important to to start soloing over. It's called the Turnaround Progression. Jazz Piano Improv Step 2: The Turnaround Progression The Turnaround Progression, also called "Rhythm Changes" is a chord progression used hundreds of songs, like I Got Rhythm, Cheek to Cheek, Blue Moon, The Way You Look Tonight, Let's Fall In Love, Moonlight In Vermont, Heart and Soul, and the list goes on and on. Therefore, once you learn to improvise on this progression, you will be able to solo over all the above tunes! How the does the Turnaround Progression work? Well, here is a very basic turnaround progression in the key of C: Basic Turnaround Progression (Rhythm Changes) on Piano in the Key of C As you can see, we start on a C major 7 chord, which is the 1 chord in the key of C (it is built on the 1st note of the C scale). Next we have an A minor 7 chord – this is the 6 chord because it is built on the 6th note of the scale. Next we have a 2 chord, the D minor 7, and this is built on the 2nd note of the C scale, and finally, we have a G7 chord, the 5 chord, which is built on the 5th note of the scale. You can think of this progression as a 1-6-2-5 progression. Also, notice that these are all 7th chords. Why do we use 7th chords in jazz, and not major and minor chords? Because in jazz music, we want to "color" ordinary major and minor chords, and because chords are built in 3rds, the 7th is the next "third interval" above the 5th of your chord. As you learn more about jazz piano, you'll discover that by stacking more 3rds above the 7th, you can achieve even more color (see Coloring Dominant Chords With Extensions for a deep dive on this topic). Why does the Turnaround Progression sound so good? The Turnaround Progression sounds good because it uses one of the most powerful harmonic devices in music, the 5-1 harmony. In other words, chord progressions sound when each chord is proceeded by a chord that is a fifth interval down. So a G7 leads to C Major 7 (G7 is a 5th above C), a Dm7 leads to G7 (Dm7 is a fifth above G), and an Am7 leads to Dm7 (Am7 is a 5th above D). Because almost all of these chords are a 5th apart, the chord progression naturally repeats on itself, making it an excellent progression to write songs over and improvise over. Now that you know the basic Turnaround Progression, let's make it sound jazzy. For a deep dive on the Turnaround Progression, checkout these courses: The Amazing Turnaround Course Soloing Over the Turnaround (Beginner/Intermediate) Soloing Over the Turnaround (Intermediate/Advanced) Jazz Piano Improv Step 3: Stylizing the Turnaround Progression In this section, we are going "stylize" the Turnaround Progression in a jazz swing style. There are basically two ways of doing this: If you are a beginner jazz student, then I recommend chord shells. If you have some jazz experience, skip down to the walking bass approach. Chord Shells Chord shells are a simple way of playing chords where you remove the 5th from the chord, leaving the root, 3rd, and 7th "shell". Here is a basic C Major 7 chord shell: C Major 7 Chord Shell with 3 Notes (C E B) Another way of playing the chord shell is to only play the root and 3rd of the chord: C Major 7 Chord Shell with 2 Notes (C & E) Or a root and 7th of the chord: C Major 7 Chord Shell with 2 Notes (C & B) Now, a very efficient way of playing the left hand chords on the Turnaround Progression is to shift between the root-3rd and the root-7 of the chord. Check it out: Turnaround Progression (Rhythm Changes) using Chord Shells As you can see, we start with the root-3rd on the first chord, then go to the root-7th on the second chord, then the root-3rd, etc. With this technique, you can move between the chords without having to jump around very much in the left hand. Remember, jazz musicians want to be efficient with their chords, finding the closest positions so that they can focus their mental "real estate" on their right hand improvisation. The final step is to make the left hand swing, and one of the best ways of doing this is to apply the Charleston Rhythm to the chords: Turnaround Progression (Rhythm Changes) in the Key of C with Charleston Rhythm The Charleston Rhythm is where you place the root of the chord on beat 1 and the chord on the "and of beat 2". A common mistake I hear beginner jazz students make is that they put the chord on beat 3. Make sure you are putting it on the "and of 2". Also, make sure you are swinging your 8th notes! In other words, don't play them straight. They should have a long-short feel. For more on Jazz Comping Patterns, checkout the Jazz Comping Courses: 5 Jazz Comping Approaches (Beginner/Intermediate) 5 Jazz Comping Approaches (Intermediate/Advanced) Walking Bass Line If you have some experience playing jazz piano, I recommend that you walk a bass line on the Turnaround Progression. Here is a great bass line that you can use: Turnaround Progression (Rhythm Changes) Piano Walking Bass Line As you can see, we are targeting the root of each chord (C, A, D, and G), and we are adding notes in between. These black notes are called Upper Neighbors, and they are exactly one half step above each target note. Now that you have a bass line, let's learn one of the most important scales for jazz improv, the Mixo-Blues scale. For more on how to walk bass lines on any chord progression, checkout the Walking Bass Lines courses: Jazz Walking Bass Lines (Beginner/Intermediate) Jazz Walking Bass Lines (Intermediate/Advanced) Jazz Piano Improv Step 4: The Mixo-Blues Scale The Mixo-Blues scale is one of the most important scales in jazz improv because it works on so many chords and chord progressions. Here is the C Mixo-Blues scale: C Mixo-Blues Scale for Piano with Fingering What are the notes of the C Mixo-Blues Scale? The notes are C D D# E F F# G A Bb. As you can see, there are 9 notes in this scale. Why do we call it Mixo-Blues? Because it is a combination of the C Mixolydian Scale (C D E F G A Bb) and the Blues Scale (C Eb F F# G Bb). This scale is incredibly effective because it works on Dominant 7 chords, Minor 7 chords, and Major 6/9 chords. These are 3 of the most common chords you'll find in jazz. It works over a 12-bar blues progression, and, in the case of this lesson, this scale works very well over the Turnaround Progression! How to Master the Mixo-Blues Scale Now, before you practice the scale, I want you to observe a few things. First, this scale is a 3-finger scale, meaning you can play the whole thing with only the thumb, index, and middle finger. Second, the scale segment shapes are very similar. What I mean by this is that the first three notes, C D and Eb, have an up-slope shape. Then, you cross your thumb under and play the next 3 notes, E F and F#, which is also an up-slope shape. Finally, you cross under and play the last chord segment, G A Bb, which is an up-slope shape. Isn't that cool? "Seeing the scale" in terms of these 3-note segment shapes will help you build speed as you practice it. Now, I recommend practicing this scale up and down the piano and getting very comfortable with it. Try increasing your speed until you feel confident with it. To learn which scales to work on any jazz chord, checkout the Scale for Improv Courses: Scales for Improv on Major & Minor Chords Scales for Improv on 7th Chords Jazz Piano Improv Step 5: Exercises Now that you know the Turnaround Progression and the Mixo-Blues scale, GREAT! Now, we're all done and just make up lines and you'll sound like a pro! I'm KIDDING! If you want to master jazz piano improv, you need to practice improvising with exercises. This is one of the biggest mistakes I see jazz teachers make when teaching jazz. They give the student a chord progression, a scale, and then say "just make stuff up". How can you "make stuff up" unless you know what to do with the scale?!? Talk about a recipe for failure! To master improv, it is essential that you practice the next 3 exercises. They will help you create amazing jazz lines, and they're not very hard. Exercise 1: 8th Notes If you analyze most jazz pianists' improvisations, you'll discover that the most common note value they use are 8th notes. Therefore, these are the most important notes to practice improvisation. Here is an 8th note exercise that you can use to practice improvisation over the Turnaround Progression: Jazz Piano Improv Exercise 1 – 8th Notes C Mixo-Blues Scale Now, in this exercise we do use triplets to start the exercise so that we can repeat the scale starting in the same spot in the next measure, but most of the notes here are 8th notes. I recommend practicing this scale up and down over the Turnaround Progression, developing speed and comfort. Make sure the notes line up correctly with the left hand!! This is probably the biggest mistake I hear beginner jazz students make. A great resource to practice this is the smart sheet music, which allows you to slow the music way down and even transpose it to any key with the click of one button. Now that you have practiced 8th notes, let's go ahead and make up 8th note lines. 2 Simple Rules to Creating Beautiful Jazz Lines How do you create jazz lines? Simply follow these two principles: That's it! Improvising jazz is a lot like speaking. We speak in sentences, and our thoughts are conveyed in a paragraphs. Similarly, your entire solo is the "paragraph" and each thought is a "sentence". Therefore, you want to leave little gaps in between you lines so that the listener has time to understand each musical thought. Now, you might be thinking, that's great Jonny! But a lot of my lines sound the same. How do I create variety in my lines? How to Create Variety in Your Jazz Improv: To create variety in your jazz improvisation, follow these 3 improv criteria: In other words, start one line on the Eb. Then start the next line on the Bb. Then start the next line on the D. You can pick ANY starting note from the C Mixo-Blues scale Then, try starting your line on beat 1. Then start your next line on beat 2. Then start the next one on beat 3. You can even start your lines on the off-beats, like the "and of 1" or the "and of 3". Be creative! Record yourself, and then listen back and analyze your solo. Did you start most of your lines on the same beat? Is there a beat that you never start your lines on, like beat 4 or the "and of beat 2"? Work to improve this each time you solo. Lastly, make sure you are playing lines up and down the piano. Sometimes beginner students will play a lot of "down lines". Then they'll play the next line starting high and playing down. Make sure you are playing a balanced combination of up and down lines. Exercise 2: Triplets The second most common note value for jazz piano improvisers is triplets. Here is an excellent triplet exercise for you to practice over the Turnaround Progression: Jazz Piano Improv Exercise 2 – Triplet C Mixo-Blues Scale The wonderful thing about triplets is… triplets are wonderful things! OK, that's a reference to Tigger from Winnie the Pooh singing about Tiggers, but the same could be said of triplets… they are wonderful, exciting, and full of energy! Because they move quickly, they are a great device to move you up and down to different registers of the keyboard quickly. Once you have practiced triplets over the chord progression, practice creating triplet lines. Again, the same rules apply: any of the notes from the C Mixo-Blues scale work. Just make sure you leave little gaps in your lines. I also recommend following the 3 Soloing Criteria to help create more interesting lines. Exercise 3: Slides The 3rd and final exercise is a slide exercise. This is one of the most common techniques that jazz musicians use to make their solos sound bluesy. Here is the full exercise: Jazz Piano Improv Exercise 3 – Slides with the C Mixo-Blues Scale Notice that we are sliding the D with a down-slide, the E with an up-slide, and the A with an up-slide. These are generally the best notes to slide, although I will also often do a down-slide to the F, and an up-slide to the G. I recommend practicing this scale up and down the piano over the Turnaround Progression. Once you have done this, it's time to start using slides in your improvisation. Remember, you can slide any of these 3 notes on any of the Turnaround Progression chords. The trick is to play phrases, or lines. Make each line count, and make sure to leave little gaps in between your lines. For a deep dive on how to use blues in your improv, check out these courses: The 10-Lesson Blues Challenge (Beginner/Intermediate) The 10-Lesson Blues Challenge (Intermediate/Advanced) The Bible of Blues Riffs – 60 Riffs (Beginner/Intermediate) The Bible of Blues Riffs – 60 Riffs (Intermediate/Advanced) Jazz Piano Improv Step 6: Putting It All Together The final step is to put all of your soloing techniques together. Try combining 8th notes, triplets, and slides. Record yourself improvising, and then listen back to your recording. Did you use very many triplets? Did you use very many slides? Did you tend to slide only the D and the E, but left out the A? Keep trying to invent new lines, starting each line on a different note, on a different beat, and a different direction. If you truly want to understand jazz improv, I highly recommend you follow our jazz learning tracks. You can find a learning track for Jazz Swing (Track 1, Track 2), Cocktail Jazz (Track 1, Track 2), and Latin Jazz (Track 1, Track 2). Thanks for learning, and see you in the next lesson! Your teacher, Jonny May Share This

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