



Improvise With Intervals

BY ALAN PASQUA

INTERVALLIC IMPROVISATION LEADS TO A MORE INDIVIDUAL STYLE OF PLAYING. IT CAN HELP YOU find your own voice by forcing you to avoid familiar avenues and improvisational habits. I discovered this style by listening to jazz greats like John Coltrane, Woody Shaw, and Larry Young. Their ability to jump around a chord instead of always playing through it in scale fashion always intrigued me. Improvising on a chord progression with an interval-based approach is less predictable than the scalar alternative. Let's examine the difference between these two approaches. On piano, it may feel more natural at first to play notes that are close to each other. Try the intervallic examples in this lesson, though, and you'll be surprised at how easily they fit the hand—and how fresh they sound.

1. *ii-V-I* Progression

Let's first look at the difference between scalar and intervallic playing over a staple of jazz improvisation, the *ii-V-I* progression. Scalar playing involves playing the scale almost totally in order (as in **Ex. 1a**), while the intervallic playing in **Ex. 1b** has only one set of adjacent notes in the entire phrase. With intervallic playing, you end up exploring more of the chord's extensions. Notice how the top *E* in **Ex. 1b** sounds more like the ninth of a *D minor* chord, instead of

Ex. 1a.



Ex. 1b.



See Alan Pasqua play live with Allan Holdsworth, and get audio examples of these techniques.

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2. *iii-VI-II-V-I* Progression

Here's another common and venerable chord sequence in jazz. In the scalar approach of **Ex. 2a**, the shape of the melodic line is fairly predictable in both direction and intensity. In the intervallic approach of **Ex. 2b**, the line becomes more interesting and unexpected. Notice that I use some adjacent scale notes on the $A7\flat9$ chord as an approach for my next leap. It really helps to think of music visually as you explore these new sonorities.

Ex. 2a.

E $\text{min}7$ A $7\flat9$ D $\text{min}7$ G alt. C Lydian

Ex. 2b.

E $\text{min}7$ A $7\flat9$ D $\text{min}7$ G alt. C Lydian

3. *ii-V-I* Minor Progression

Let's explore these two techniques again on the well-known chord sequence known as the minor *ii-V-I* progression. Again, notice the standard direction and tonality in the scalar movement of **Ex. 3a**, as contrasted with the more engaging musical interest in the intervallic motion of **Ex. 3b**. In the latter, I like to use the natural ninth of the $D\text{min}7\flat5$ chord. Right at the start, a big leap is followed by a small step. This illustrates tension and release through the use of intervals, and keeps the listener engaged.

Ex. 3a.

D $\text{min}7\flat5$ G 7alt. C min

Ex. 3b.

D $\text{min}7\flat5$ G 7alt. C min

4. Turnarounds

Turnarounds are also great places to compare these two playing styles visually. In **Ex. 4a**, the scalar line appears much smoother in nature, while **Ex. 4b** looks more disjointed. The goal here is to make the intervallic example sound as smooth as the scale example looks. Also, I've noticed that intervallic playing seems to generate more rhythm, which can really propel the line forward.

Ex. 4a.

C Eb7 Ab G7 C

Ex. 4b.

C Eb7 Ab G7 C

5. Chromatic ii-V Chords

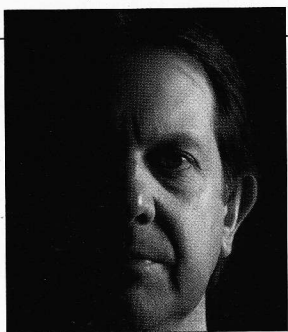
In this exercise, **Ex. 5a** uses adjacent notes corresponding to the scale of the chord. In the intervallic **Ex. 5b**, I'm arpeggiating through the chords, changing direction often. This makes the line sound a lot less predictable, and to my ear, much more interesting.

Ex. 5a.

Bmin7 E7 Bbmin7 Eb7 Amin7 D7 Abmin7 Db7

Ex. 5b.

Bmin7 E7 Bbmin7 Eb7 Amin7 D7 Abmin7 Db7



Practice Tip

"To start getting your hands around intervallic improvisation, play any chord, then arpeggiate the notes of its corresponding scale while never playing more than two adjacent notes in a row," advises **Alan Pasqua**, Chairman of Jazz Studies at the University of Southern California. Pasqua began studying piano at age seven, and his eclectic career includes playing with everyone from jazz legends like Jack DeJohnette and Michael Brecker to icons like Bob Dylan, Santana, Aretha Franklin, and Elton John. His latest release as a leader, *Twin Bill*, is out now. Visit him at alanpasqua.com.

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