

Jazz Piano Improvisation Exercises

the pentatonic HAND GRIP & the pentatonic ROW

Exercise 1.1-1.4 are all related to the minor **pentatonic hand grip**. We place the left hand on a minor pentatonic scale with the pinkie on the keynote and then we place the rest of the fingers on the scale stepwise upwards. Then we thin out the minor pentatonic scale playing only finger 5, 3 and 1 having a quartal chord. With the right hand we play the minor pentatonic scale in the same tonality as the left hand placing the right hand thumb on the pentatonic keynote and then we place the rest of the fingers on the scale stepwise upwards – right hand is now ready to improvise using this hand grip. The left and right hand fingers are always placed in the same manner using the same hand grip no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.1-2.2 are also related to the minor pentatonic hand grip. Now we play the hand grip in 3 different positions: position 1, position 2 and position 3 each spaced with a perfect fifth. These three positions together we entitle the **pentatonic row**. This row of pentatonic hand grips is very useful in many contexts. With the pentatonic row we can for example play all the church modes! Again, the left hand is always placed on position 1. The right hand can freely improvise on position 1, 2 and 3. Left hand can be thinned out to form the quartal chord (or other patterns).

The idea about using hand grips are essential and can be used in many contexts. Placing the fingers in the same manner using hand grips we achieve an easy and free minded improvisation style and we can use and reuse phrases easily in any tonality. Improvisation is all about freeing our mind not thinking about theory and techniques. Having exercised a specific hand grip regularly, we find out that the hand grip completely takes control when improvising and we can free our mind to express Music.

All these exercises are in the tonality of “F”. But they should be rehearsed in every key. Best to do this “in time” playing a bar in a specific tonality and then play the next bar in another tonality and so on...

Use a metronome. Always start in a slow speed. Better to be slow and precise than fast and unsteady. Don't have any unnecessary tension in your hands. If so, then just STOP and relax. When every tension is completely gone then start again. When mastering a certain speed we are ready to speed up the exercise just a little bit. When reaching tempo 120 BPM we are pretty fast, I think :)

All the exercises and music theory are explained in details in this video at the “NewJazz” YouTube Channel:
<https://youtu.be/61bI3dgdXMo>

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Have Fun ☺

Warm Regards

Oliver Prehn, NewJazz

Exercise 1.1: The F minor pentatonic hand grip up and down.

Play this exercise in all tonalities in time: 1 bar in Fmi then the next bar in F#mi and the next bar in Gmi and so on stepwise up and down the keyboard. Use the same fingering and hand grip no matter tonality!

Exercise 1.2: The F minor pentatonic hand grip up and down with displaced rhythm .

As exercise 1.1 but with shifted rhythm: 1/16 note backwards. Shift the rhythm backwards and forwards to change the articulation of the phrase. Play this exercise in all tonalities as exercise 1.1. Use the same fingering and hand grip no matter tonality!

Exercise 1.3: Lick using the F minor pentatonic hand grip.

This lick is just one out of thousands - find your favorite licks using the minor pentatonic hand grip and rehearse those in every tonality stepwise up and down the keyboard. Try also to shift between random tonalities; for example from Fmi pentatonic to Abmi pentatonic to Bmi pentatonic (going upwards in a sequence of minor thirds). Remember to reuse the fingering and pentatonic hand grip no matter tonality, also if it may seem a little awkward in the start – the benefits using the same fingering and hand grip when improvising are enormous.

Exercise 1.4: “Fool around”

This type of exercise is very important. Having rehearsed the above strict exercises for about 30 minutes use 15 minutes just fooling around on the piano trying to incorporate the techniques into your improvisation style. Choose different random tonalities for the minor pentatonic hand grip, mix different small pentatonic motifs that you just come up with. Find out what sounds bad and what sounds great. Reuse the good stuff and skip the bad stuff. Fool around, play around, have fun, make Music!

Exercise 2.1: The pentatonic row with starting point “F” - up and down.

The pentatonic row represents the minor pentatonic handgrip at 3 different positions each spaced with a perfect fifth. This pentatonic row has the starting point “F”: Position 1 is Fmi pentatonic, position 2 is Cmi pentatonic and position 3 is Gmi pentatonic. The different positions are marked with arches and text (“pos. 1”, “pos. 2”, “pos. 3”). Left hand is always fixed on position 1 – by lifting finger 4 and 2 we get the quartal chord. Right hand plays position 1-3. Play this exercise in all tonalities stepwise up and down the keyboard. Use the same fingering no matter tonality!

Notice: In this exercise position 1 and 2 in the right hand are incomplete playing only the 3 first fingers – but still we “think” the complete hand grip because our fingers are placed on the pentatonic scale ready to play the missing notes if necessary.

Exercise 2.2 [variation 1]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point “F” moving from position 1 to position 2.

Right hand moves from position 1 to position 2. Play this exercise in all tonalities stepwise up and down the keyboard “in time”. Do also play random tonalities after each other “in time” – you choose the tonalities. Use the same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.2 [variation 2]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point "f" moving from position 1 to position 3.

Same pattern, rhythm and fingering as exercise 2.3 [variation 1] but now the right hand plays position 1 and position 3. Changing the positions makes the variations! Left hand always stays at position 1. Play this exercise in different tonalities. Use the same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.2 [variation 3]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point "f" moving from position 2 to position 1.

Same pattern, rhythm and fingering as the above variations. Left hand always stays at position 1. Right hand moves from position 2 to position 1. Play this exercise in different tonalities. Use the same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.2 [variation 4]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point “f” moving from position 2 to position 3.

The musical notation shows a piano exercise in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The right hand starts with a chord in position 2 (F4, A4, B4, D5) and then moves to position 3 (G4, B4, C5, E5) and back to position 2 (F4, A4, B4, D5). The left hand stays in position 1 (F3, B2, C3, F3) throughout. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above the notes.

Same pattern, rhythm and fingering as the above variations. Left hand always stays at position 1. Right hand moves from position 2 to position 3. Notice how we can make variations on the same lick just by applying different positions. Each variation sounds very different, but they are very equal to perform because we reuse the hand grip, the fingering and the rhythm. So just by changing positions we can variate the improvisation and the music. Play this exercise in different tonalities. Use the same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.2 [variation 5]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point “f” moving from position 3 to position 1.

The musical notation shows a piano exercise in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The right hand starts with a chord in position 3 (G4, B4, C5, E5) and then moves to position 1 (F4, A4, B4, D5) and back to position 3 (G4, B4, C5, E5). The left hand stays in position 1 (F3, B2, C3, F3) throughout. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above the notes.

Right hand moves from position 3 to position 1. Notice how easy we now can play the lick because we are reusing the fingering and hand grip in each variation – having practiced one variation we have actually practiced them all. Play this exercise in different tonalities – use same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.2 [variation 6]: Lick using the pentatonic row with starting point “f” moving from position 3 to position 2.

Right hand moves from position 3 to position 2. Play this exercise in different tonalities – use same fingering no matter tonality!

Exercise 2.3: “Fool around”

Having rehearsed the above strict exercises for about 30 minutes use 15 minutes just fooling around on the piano trying to incorporate the techniques into your improvisation style. Left hand always plays position 1. Place the left hand pinky on a given note. Use this note as starting point for the pentatonic row. Right hand improvises freely using position 1, 2 and 3. Change the left hand pinky note randomly to other notes and let the pentatonic row follow. Left hand pinkie controls. Fool around, play music, have fun.

Final comment

It’s fun just choosing different random starting notes for the pentatonic row while playing a solo. But if we choose specific notes as starting points we can actually achieve different structures, patterns and main tonalities in our play. Watch this video and learn more: <https://youtu.be/61bl3dgdXMo>

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